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Published on *Al-Islam.org* (https://www.al-islam.org)

The Pilgrimage to the House of Allah

I was eighteen years of age when the Tunisian national society of Scouts agreed to send me as one of six Tunisian representatives to the first conference for Islamic and Arab scouts which took place in Mecca. I was the youngest member of the mission, and certainly the least educated, for there were with me two headmasters, a teacher from the capital, a journalist and a fifth whose job I did not know, although I later realized that he was a relative of the then minister for education.

The journey was rather indirect, our first stop was Athens where we stayed for two days, next was Amman, the capital of Jordan, in which we spent four days, and then we arrived in Saudi Arabia and participated in the conference and performed the rites of pilgrimage and Umra.

I cannot describe my feelings when I entered the House of Allah for the first time; my heart was beating so fast. I felt as if it was coming out of my chest to see this ancient House for itself, and the tears kept coming out of my eyes endlessly. I imagined the angels carried me over the pilgrims and up to the roof of the Holy Kaba and answered the call of Allah from there: "Allah, here I am, your servant came to you to be at your service, Labbayka Allahumma Labbayk." Listening to other pilgrims, I gathered that most of them had waited for a long time and saved up throughout their lives to come to Mecca.

In my case, the journey was sudden and I was not prepared for it. I remember my father bidding me a tearful farewell, when he saw the airplane ticket and knew for certain that I was going to perform the Pilgrimage, saying, "Congratulations, my son, Allah has willed that you should perform the Pilgrimage before me at this age, for you are the son of Sidi Ahmed al-Tijani, pray for me at Allah's House to forgive me and grant me the pilgrimage to His House." I felt that Allah Himself called me and cared for me and brought me to the place where everybody longs to visit, although some cannot make it.

I appreciated this opportunity, therefore I threw myself into my prayers and tawaf (circling around the Kaba) even when the drinking from the water of Zamzam and going up the mountains where people competed to get to Hara cave in al-Nur mountain. I was only beaten by a young Sudanese pilgrim so I was "second of two". When I got there, I rolled myself on the floor as if I was rolling on the Great Prophet's lap and smelled his breathing what great memories they left such a deep impression on me that I will never forget.

Allah has cared for me in many ways, for I was liked by everybody I met in the conference, and many asked for my address in order to write to me in the future. As for my Tunisian companions, they looked down on me from the first meeting we had at the Tunisian Capital when we were preparing for the journey. I sensed their feeling, but I was patient, for I knew that the people of the North look down on the people from the South and consider them backward. Soon enough their views started to change.

Throughout the journey and during the conference and the pilgrimage I proved myself to be worthy of their respect due to my knowledge of poetry and by winning of many prizes. I went back to my country with more than twenty addresses from different nationalities.

We stayed twenty five days in Saudi Arabia, during which we met many learned Muslim scholars (Ulama) and listened to their lectures. I was influenced by some of the beliefs of the Wahabi sect and wished that all Muslims followed them. Indeed, I thought that they were chosen by Allah among all His worshippers to guard His House, for they were the purest and most knowledgeable people on earth, and Allah had given them oil so that they could serve and could care for the pilgrims, guests of the Merciful.

When I came back from the pilgrimage to my country I wore the Saudi national dress and was surprised by the reception that my father had prepared. Many people gathered at the station, led by Shaykhs of the Isawiyya, Tijaniyya and the Qadiriyya Sufi order complete with ceremonial drums.

They took me through the streets of our town chanting and cheering, and every time we passed a mosque I was stopped for a short time whilst people, especially the old folk, came to congratulate me with tears in their eyes longing to see the House of Allah and to visit the Prophet's grave. People looked at me as if they have not seen a young pilgrim (Hajj) of my age in Gafsa before.

I lived the happiest days of my life during that period, and many people, including the notables of the town came to visit and to congratulate me, and often asked me to read al-Fatihah (the Opening Sura of the Qur'an) with the prayers in the presence of my father, from whom I was embarrassed although he kept encouraging me. Every time a group of visitors left the house, my mother came to the sitting area to burn incense and read some amulets in order to rid me of bad spells.

My father kept the celebration going for three nights in the centre of the Tijani Sufi order, each night he slaughtered a sheep for a banquet. People asked me all sorts of questions, and my answers were mainly to praise the Saudis for their efforts to support and spread Islam.

Soon people started calling me Hajj (Pilgrim), and whenever somebody shouted Hajj, it only meant me. Gradually I became known amongst the various religious groups especially the Muslim Brotherhood, and I went around the mosques lecturing on religious issues, telling people not to kiss the graves or touch the woods for blessing because these are signs of Polytheism.

My activities started to increase and I was giving religious lessons on Fridays before the Imam's speech. I moved from Abi Yakub mosque to the Great Mosque because the Friday prayers were held in different

times in those mosques; at midday in the former and during the afternoon in the latter.

On Sundays, my lessons were mostly attended by my students at the secondary school where I taught Technology. They liked me and appreciated my efforts because I gave them a lot of my time trying to help them in removing the clouds from their minds due to the teachings of the atheist and communist teachers of Philosophy and there were plenty of them!

My students used to wait with eagerness for these religious circles and some of them came to my house for I bought a number of Islamic books and read them thoroughly to bring myself up the standard of the questions I used to be asked. During the year in which I did the pilgrimage to Mecca, I completed the other half of my religious duties by getting married.

It was the wish of my mother to see me married before she passed away, for she had seen the weddings of all my half-brothers and Allah gave her what she wished and I got married to a young lady that I had never met before. My mother died after having been present at the birth of my first and second child, and she was preceded by my father who had died two years before her. Prior to his death he did the pilgrimage to Mecca, and two years later before his death, he turned to Allah in repentance.

The Libyan revolution succeeded during the period when the Arabs and the Muslims were feeling their humiliating defeat at the hands of the Israelis, and we saw that young revolutionary leader speaking on behalf of Islam and praying among his people calling for the liberation of al-Quds.

I became attracted to his ideas, as did many young Muslims and Arabs, and as a result we organized an educational visit to Libya by a group consisting of forty men for the Education Department. We visited the country at the beginning of the revolution and when we came back home we were very optimistic and hopeful for a better future for Muslims and Arabs in the whole world.

During the previous years I had corresponded with some friends, and my friendship with a few of them became very close, so that they even asked me to visit them. Thus, I made all the preparation for a journey during the summer vacation which lasted three months. I planned to go to Libya and Egypt by road and from there across the sea to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and then to Saudi Arabia. I meant to do Umra there and to renew my commitment to the Wahabiyya in whose fervor I campaigned amongst the students and in the mosques which were frequented by the Muslim Brotherhood.

My reputation passed from my hometown to other neighboring towns through visitors who might attend the Friday prayer and listen to the lessons then go back to their communities. My reputation reached Shaykh Ismail al Hadifi, leader of the Sufi order in Tuzer, capital of al-Jarid and the birthplace of the famous poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi. This Shaykh has many followers in Tunisia and abroad, especially among the working classes in France and Germany.

I received an invitation from him through his agents in Gafsa who wrote me a long letter thanking me fur my services to Islam and the Muslims. In the letter they claimed that the things I was doing would not

bring me nearer to Allah because I had no learned Shaykh: “He who has no Shaykh his Shaykh will be a devil, and you need a Shaykh to show you the way, otherwise half of the knowledge is not completed.” They informed me that (the greatest of his age) Shaykh Ismail himself had chosen me among all people to be one of his closest private circle of followers.

I was absolutely delighted when I heard the news. In fact I cried in response to the divine care which had elevated me to the highest and best places simply because I had been following the steps of Sidi al-Hadi al-Hafian, who was a Sufi Shaykh known for his miracles, and I had become one of his closest followers. Also I accompanied Sidi Silah Balsaih and Sidi al-Jilani and other contemporary Sufi leaders. So I waited eagerly for that meeting.

When I entered the Shaykh's house I looked curiously at the faces, and the place was full of followers among whom were Shaykhs wearing spotless white robes. After the greeting ceremony ended, Shaykh Ismail appeared and every one stood up and started kissing his hands with great respect. His deputy winked at me to tell me that this was the Shaykh, but I did not show any enthusiasms for I was waiting for something different from what I saw.

I had drawn an imaginary picture of him in my mind in accordance with what his agents and followers had told me about his miracles, and all I saw was an ordinary man without dignity or reverence. During the meeting I was introduced to him by his deputy, and the Shaykh received me warmly and sat me to his right and gave me some food.

After dinner the ritual ceremony started and the deputy introduced me again to take the oath from the Shaykh, and everybody congratulated me and blessed me. Later on I understood from what men were saying that I was known to them, which encouraged me to disagree with some of the answers given by the Shaykh to questions from the audience. Such behavior led some of the men to express their disgust and to consider it bad manners in the presence of the Shaykh who is usually left unchallenged. The Shaykh sensed the uneasy atmosphere and tried to cool the situation by using his wit, so he said,

"He whose start is burning, his end will be shining." The audience took that as a graceful sign from the Shaykh, which would guarantee my shining end, and congratulated me for that. However the Shaykh was clever and very experienced, so he did not let me continue with my irritable incursion and told us the following story:

One day a learned man attended a class held by a pious man and the pious man asked the learned man to go and get washed, so the learned man went and washed himself then returned to the class. The pious man repeated his demand, "Go and get washed". The learned man went and washed himself again thinking that he had not done it right the first time. When he came back to the class, the pious man asked him to wash again. The learned man started crying and said.

"Master, I have washed myself from my work and knowledge and I have nothing left except that which Allah has granted me through your hands." At that moment the pious man said, "Now you can sit down,"

I realized that I was the one whom the Shaykh referred to in the story, and everyone else realized that as well, for they rebuked me when the Shaykh left us to have a rest. They asked me to be silent and to show respect for the Shaykh lest I fail in my work, basing their argument on the Qur'anic verse:

"O you who believe! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, and do not speak loud to him as you speak to one another, lest your deeds become null while you do not perceive."
(***Holy Qur'an 49:2***)

I then recognized my limits, so I complied and obeyed the orders, and the Shaykh kept me near him, and subsequently I stayed with him for three days, during which I asked him many questions, some of them to test his knowledge.

The Shaykh knew that and used to answer me by saying that there are two meanings for the Qur'an, one revealed and another hidden to a seventh degree. He opened his private safe for me and showed me a personal document which contained the names of pious and learned people connecting him with Imam 'Ali via many people such as Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili.

It is worth noting here that these meetings held by the Shaykh are spiritual ones, and usually start with the Shaykh reciting and chanting some verses from the Qur'an. After that he reads a few poetic verses followed by chants and "dhikrs" by the men, and these chants are mainly centered on asceticism, piety and the renunciation of this life and the eagerness to seek the life hereafter.

After having finished with this part, the first man on the right hand side of the Shaykh reads what he can from the Qur'an, and when he says "And Allah said that truthfully" the Shaykh reads the beginning of another piece of poetry and the whole congregation recites it after him, each person then reading a Qur'anic verse. Shortly after that the men start leaning gently to the left and to the right, moving with the rhythms of the chants until the Shaykh stands up, and with him the entire congregation, forming a circle with him at the centre.

Next they start chanting Ah, Ah, Ah, Ah, and the Shaykh turns around in the centre, and then goes to each one of them, and shortly after that the tempo heats up and the men start jumping up and down, shouting in an organized but irritating rhythm.

After some hard work, quietness gradually prevails, and the Shaykh reads his last pieces of poetic verse, and then everybody comes to kiss the Shaykh's head and shoulders until they finally sit down. I have shared with those people in their rituals but not convincingly, for they contradicted my own beliefs of not attributing any associates to Allah i.e. not to request anything but from Allah. I fell on the floor crying and my mind scattered between two contradictory ideas.

One being the Sufi ideology in which a man goes through a spiritual experience based on the feeling of fear, on asceticism and on trying to approach Allah through the saints and the learned men.

The second idea was the Wahabi which had taught me that all of that was an attempt to attribute associates to Allah, and that Allah will never forgive them.

If the Great Prophet Muhammad (saw) cannot help, nor could he intercede, then what is the value of those saints and pious people who came after him?

In spite of the new position given to me by the Shaykh, for he appointed me as his deputy in Gafsa, I was not totally convinced, although I sometimes sympathized with the Sufi orders and felt that I should continue to respect them for the sake of those saints and God fearing people. I often argued, basing my argument on the Qur'anic verse:

"And call not with Allah any other god, there is no other god but He." (***Holy Quran 28:88***)

And if somebody said to me that Allah said:

"O you who believe be careful of (***your duty to***) ***Allah and seek means of nearness to Him."*** (***Holy Quran 5:35***)

I answered him quickly in the way that the Saudi Ulama had taught me by saying "The way to seek Allah is by doing a good deed." In any case, my mind was rather confused and troubled during that period, but from time to time some followers came to my house, where we celebrated al-Imarah (a type of dhikr).

Our neighbors felt uneasy about the noises which we produced, but could not confront me, therefore they complained to my wife, via their wives, and when I learnt about the problem, I asked the followers to celebrate dhikr elsewhere. I excused myself by informing them that I was going abroad for three months, so I said farewell to my family and friends and sought my God, depending on Him, and not believing in any other god but Him.

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