



Letters of a Sufi Master

The Shaikh al-'Arabî ad-Darqâwî

Titus Burckhardt

PREFACE

MULAY¹ AL-'ARABÎ AD-DARQÂWÎ, the author of these letters, was the founder of the Darqâwî Order of Sufis, a Moroccan branch of the great Shâdhilî Order which was itself founded by the Shaikh Abu'l-Hasan ash-Shâdhilî in the 13th century A.D.

According to Mulay al-'Arabî's own account, he met his Master Mûlay 'Al al-Imrânî, known as *al-Jamal* (the camel), at Fez in 1767. This Master was himself a disciple of the Shâdhilî Shaikh Mûlay al-'Arabî al-Fâsî.

The spiritual radiation of the Shaikh ad-Darqâwî brought about a sudden great flowering of Sufism in Morocco and Algeria and beyond. This is worth mentioning because scant justice has been done to it by orientalists, who tend to stress a uniform decadence in Islamic mysticism since the end of the Middle Ages.

Several of Mûlay al-'Arabî's direct disciples became outstanding Masters themselves, and gave their names to new branches. This must not be considered as a secession from the order. The acceptance of a new name for a *tariqah*² on the emergence of an eminent Master simply means that this Master has renewed or adapted the method – without changing the constants – in accordance with his own particular original perception of spiritual realities. The full name of the Madanî branch, for example, remains *At-Tarîqat al-Madaniyyat ad-Darqâwiyyat ash-Shâdhiliyyah*, but in practice only one name is used: some members of this particular branch call themselves *Madaniyyah*, others call themselves *Shâdhiliyyah*, but they are all none the less *Darqâwâ*, reciting the litanies of that order, performing its sacred dance (which differs from those of the Shâdhiliyyah who are not Darqâwâ), and referring to Mûlay al-'Arabî ad-Darqâwî as “the Shaikh of our Shaikhs.” Amongst those of his disciples whom Mûlay al-'Arabî recognised as “autonomous” Shaikhs was Mûlay Muhammad al-Bûzîdî, who was to have succeeded him but who died before him, and whose disciple Ahmad ibn 'Ajîbah was the author of some remarkable Sufi treatises.

¹ "My lord" or "my Patron," a title used in Morocco to denote a descendant of the Prophet. We have transcribed the word here according to its current Moroccan pronunciation rather than its classical Arabic form *mawlây*.

² Literally "way," "method," and by extension "order" or "brotherhood."

Letters of a Sufi Master - The Shaikh al-'Arabî ad-Darqâwî

Mûlay al-'Arabî himself, who had succeeded his own Master in 1779, lived to be about eighty years old and died in 1823 in Bû Barîh in the mountains north of Fez among the Banî Zarwâl tribe where his family had been established for many generations.

He was succeeded in Morocco by his son Mûlay at-Tayyib ad-Darqâwî from whom the present Moroccan head of the order is descended. Another of Mûlay al-'Arabî's successors was the Shaikh Muhammad al-Fâsî, who founded one Darqâwî Zâwiyah¹ in Cairo and another in Colombo. Many if not all the Shâdhiliyyah of Ceylon are in fact Darqâwî and look to the Cairo centre of the Fâsiyyah-Darqâwî as being their mother Zâwiyah.

Another successor was the Shaikh Muhammad Hasan Zâfir al-Madanî (the founder of the already mentioned Madaniyyah) who had originally come from Medina in search of a spiritual Master and who had taken guidance from many Shaikhs, until he finally met the founder of the Darqâwî himself. The Shaikh al-Madanî's son, also named Muhammad Zâfir, writing at the end of the last century, tells how his father met Mûlay al-'Arabî in 1809 and adds : "He took the path from him and his heart was opened under his guidance, and if it be asked who was my father's Shaikh, it was Mûlay al-'Arabî ad-Darqâwî."

The Shaikh al-Madanî had a large following and founded many Zâwiyahs, the chief of which was at Misurata in Libya where he is buried. He was succeeded by his son who went to Istanbul where it is said that he was the Shaikh of the Sultan 'Abd al-Hamîd. However this may be, there can be no doubt that he had considerable influence in Turkey, and it was there, in 1879, that he wrote his book on the order, *al-Anwâr al-Qudsiyyah*, published in Istanbul in 1884. Another of his father's successors, named 'Abd al-Qâdir, founded a Zâwiyah in Alexandria. These Darqâwî are thus as it were "first cousins" to the Darqâwî of Cairo. But it was no doubt through yet another successor, the Sharîf² 'Alî Nur ad-Dîn al-Yashrutî, that the Madanî branch had its widest expansion. This eminent Sufi, who was born in 1793 and died at the age of 105 in 1898, spent several years with his Shaikh at Misurata and then migrated to Acre in Palestine. His daughter, Sayyidah Fâtimah, who lives in Beirut, is thus the child of a man who was born in the 18th century (there must be few others alive today who can make such a claim) and her book about her father and the order in general, *Rihlah ila 'l-Haqq*, published about 1954, is a precious link with the past. During his long life, which spanned the whole of the 19th century but for two years, this spiritual grandson of the Shaikh ad-Darqâwî founded many Zâwiyahs centered on Acre, the most important of these being at Jerusalem, Damascus, Beirut and Aleppo. Today the order is particularly wide-spread in the Lebanon from where it has also taken root in Mozambique, where it has thousands of members.

But even more than the Madanî – Yashrutî branch, it is probably the 'Alawî branch of the Darqâwî which has given that order its fullest flowering outside Morocco. The Shaikh Ahmad al-'Alawî was descended from Mûlay al-'Arabî by quite a different line from those already mentioned. By the time of his death, in 1934, his disciples in Algeria (including North Africans in Paris and Marseilles), Tunis, the Yemen, Abyssinia, Syria, Palestine and elsewhere were said to be well over 200,000 in number. After his death, under the head of his Damascus Zâwiyah, the late Shaikh Muhammad al-Hâshimî,

¹ Literally "corner," the name given to the place where the members of an order congregate.

² "Noble," used in the sense of "descendant of the Prophet."

Letters of a Sufi Master - The Shaikh al-'Arabî ad-Darqâwî

'Alawî-Darqâwî Zâwiyas were founded in Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Latakia and Amman. In Aleppo, at some seasons even more than once a week, one may find as many as 5,000 Darqâwî of this 'Alawî branch congregated at the tomb of the Prophet Zachariah in the great Omayyad Mosque.

The collected letters (*rasâ'il*) of al-'Arabî ad-Darqâwî were compiled by himself, copied by his disciples and printed many times in Fez, in lithographed script. Titus Burckhardt has made this translation on the basis of two Nineteenth Century Manuscripts as well as the lithographed edition.

These letters are still read, with commentaries, in the Zâwiyahs of the Darqâwî line. But the Fez lithographed edition is now difficult to obtain, which partly explains why the letters themselves are almost entirely unknown to Western scholars, and why Brockelmann himself does not mention them; and even if they were more easily obtainable, their great importance might escape the notice of those whose knowledge of the Sufis comes only from reading works of a general nature, for these letters belong to a body of teaching which as often as not remains oral and which is a feature of what might be called "practical Sufism." What a Shaikh has to say to one or more of his disciples concerning the spiritual path he may first deliver by word of mouth and then he may or may not write it down. Mûlay al-'Arabî's Master, Mûlay 'Alî al-Jamal, was also the author of a collection of letters, but these only exist in one or two manuscripts and have never yet been published.

MARTIN LINGS

EXTRACTS FROM THE LETTERS

If you wish your path to be shortened in order to attain realization swiftly, hold fast to what is ordained (in the Koran) and to what is particularly recommended concerning voluntary observances¹ ; learn outer knowledge as is indispensable for worshipping God, but do not linger on it, since you are not required to study this deeply; a deepening of inner knowledge is what you need; and fight against covetousness; then you will see marvels. "Noble character" is nothing else but the *tasawwuf* of the Sufis, just as it is the religion of religious men. (And may God curse those who lie).

Likewise, always flee from sensuality,² for it is the opposite of spirituality and opposites do not meet. Inasmuch as you strengthen the senses you weaken the Spirit, and vice versa. Hear what happened to our Master (may God be satisfied with him) at the beginning of his journey. He had just threshed three measures of wheat and went to tell his Master he had done so. Lord al-Arabî bin Abd Allâh said to him: "If you increase in the realm of the senses, you diminish in the realm of the Spirit, and if you grow in the latter, you diminish in the former." This is obvious, because so long as you consort with (worldly) people, you will never smell the perfume of the Spirit in them; you will only smell the smell of sweat, and this is because they have been enslaved by sensuality; it has taken possession of their hearts and their limbs; they see their profit only in it, so that they chatter about it, busy themselves with it, rejoice in it alone and can barely drag themselves away from it. And yet many are they who have freed themselves from sensuality in order to plunge into the Spirit for the rest of their lives (may God be pleased with them and let us profit from their blessing, Amen, Amen, Amen). It is as if God (be He exalted) had not given them Spirit (i.e. to worldly people) and yet each one of them is part of it, as the waves are part of the ocean. If they knew this, they would not allow themselves to be distracted from the Spirit by sensory things; if they knew this, they would discover in themselves boundless oceans; and God is our Warrant for what we say.

¹ *Nawâfil* (pl. of *nâfilah*), that is, rites and other observances which are not legally obligatory but which the Prophet strongly recommended.

² *Al-hiss*: sensuality in the broadest sense of the word, i.e. attachment to sensory experience.

Letters of a Sufi Master - The Shaikh al-'Arabî ad-Darqâwî

Know (and may God be merciful to you) that the *faqîr*,¹ when he exchanges the remembrance of all things for the remembrance (*dhikr*)² of God, purifies his servitude, and whosoever serves God in a pure and unmixed way is holy (may the curse of God be on him who lies). So remember only God; be God's alone; for if you are God's, God will be yours and blessed is he who belongs to God so that God is his. Let the mention of God's word *Remember Me and I will remember you* (Koran II, 147)³ suffice to prove the excellence of the remembrance (*dhikr*) of God. And the word which the Prophet (may God bless him and give him peace) spoke on behalf of his Lord: "I am the Companion of him who calls upon Me."⁴

My Master (may God be satisfied with him) used to say to me: "I like what I hear said against you." In the same way, al-'Arabî ad-Darqâwî likes what he hears said against you – I mean that which kills your egoism and quickens your hearts; but not the contrary, for only the heedless man, the ignorant man, the man whose intelligence is tarnished and whose conscience is obscured, is concerned with that which quickens the ego (*nafs*)⁵ and kills the heart. For man has only one heart: as soon as he turns to one side, he turns away from the other, since *God did not create two hearts in the breast of man* (XXXIII, 3). In the same sense, it was said by the venerable Master, Lord Ibn 'Atâ-illâh (may God be satisfied with him) that: "To turn towards God is to turn away from the creature and to turn towards the creature is to turn away from God."

One of our brothers said to me: "I am nothing." I answered: "Do not say: 'I am nothing'; neither say: 'I am something.' Do not say: 'I need such and such a thing'; nor yet: 'I need nothing.' But say: '*Allâh*,' and you will see marvels."

Another brother said to me: "How can one cure the soul?" I answered him: "Forget it and do not think about it, for he who does not forget his soul (does not forget himself) does not remember God." So you are unable to conceive that it is the existence of the world which causes us to forget our Lord. What causes us to forget Him is the existence of ourselves, of our ego. Nothing veils Him from us except our concern, not with existence as such, but with our own desires. If we were able to forget our own existence, we would

¹ *Faqîr*: the poor (implying *al-faqîru ila 'Llâh* "poor towards God," as in the saying in the Koran: *O men, ye are poor towards God and He is the Rich, the Glorious*. (XXXV, 15). The Persian equivalent of *faqîr* is *dervish*.

² *Dhikr*: includes the meanings of mention, remembrance, invocation.

³ Quotations, from the Koran are given throughout in italics, and these will be followed simply by the numbers of chapter and verse, without the word "Koran."

⁴ This is a *hadîth qudsî* (holy utterance) addressed to the Prophet, not as a part of the Koran but as it were in parallel to it. Its transcendence is shown by the fact that God speaks in the first person. Revelations of this category concern more particularly the contemplative way.

⁵ *An-nafs* is the soul as opposed to the heart (*al-qalb*). It signifies the ego-centric, passionate soul. Accompanied by a possessive pronoun, the same word is translated as: myself, thyself, himself. *An-nafs*, the passionate soul and seat of the ego (Sanskrit *ahankâra*) is opposed to the heart inasmuch as the latter is the organ of *ar-rûh*, the Spirit. The heart can be compared to the narrowest part of an hourglass, or to the isthmus (*barzakh*) between two oceans, one salt and the other sweet (Koran LV, 19 XXIII, 102), which represent respectively the realm of temporal experience and the realm of pure contemplation. It is also said that the heart is the object of a quarrel between its father, the Spirit, and its mother, the passionate soul. If the mother has the upper hand, the heart hardens; if the father is victorious, the heart becomes luminous like Him.

Letters of a Sufi Master - The Shaikh al-‘Arabî ad-Darqâwî

find Him who is the source of our existence and at the same time we would see that we do not exist at all. How can you conceive that man could lose consciousness of the world without losing consciousness of his ego? That will never come to pass.