

YUSUF IBISH 1926–2003

Professor Yusuf Ibish, director of the Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation died on 19 January 2003 after a short illness. All of us who work at, or with, the Al-Furqan Foundation will certainly be disappointed and sad to work without his support. All of his adult lifetime Ibish was a strong supporter and promotor of Islamic culture, working to make it better known and appreciated in the non-Islamic world.

Yusuf Ibish was born in Damascus in 1926, son of Hussein Bey Ibish, a prominent Syrian landowner of Kurdish descent. Following elementary education in Damascus, Ibish studied at International College in Beirut and later at the American University of Beirut. From Beirut he went to Harvard where he studied under Sir Hamilton Gibb. He completed his doctoral thesis in 1960 and returned to the American University of Beirut where he taught at the Department of Political Science from 1960 to 1984. In 1985, Ibish continued his academic career at the American University in Washington, DC, where he was distinguished professor from 1985 to 1989, and then at Cambridge University in England, where he was visiting professor between 1991 and 1992.

Throughout his scholarly career he published twenty-four books and seventy-five articles. He planned and undertook several major research projects, such as the American University of Beirut's 'Chronology and Documents of Arab Politics' and a series of films entitled 'The Traditional World of Islam'.

Among his more important contributions was an anthology of seminal texts in pre-modern Islamic political

thought, as well as an edition of the memoirs of Emir Adil Arslan, a Pan-Arabist political figure of considerable importance in the first half of the twentieth century. Ibish, however, was at heart a peripatetic teacher, a professor who did his teaching outside the classroom as much as inside it. Opposite the Main Gate of the American University there stood until recently the famous Faisal Restaurant. It was here, in Beirut's equivalent to the Parisian Deux Magots, that one could find almost any Arab intellectual, or native Beiruti passing through, whom one hoped to encounter, and here where Ibish held court. At the centre of a circle of students, colleagues, or friends, Ibish would hold forth on almost any subject that took his fancy, from Damascene traditional crafts to American foreign policy in the Middle East. There was hardly any subject in Middle Eastern studies to which Ibish would not contribute a shaft of light, a footnote, an interesting new source, or an anecdote. He was always immensely generous with what he knew and always ready to help anyone reach his very wide circle of acquaintances throughout the Arab world and beyond.

A holder of Ford and Rockefeller fellowships at Harvard, and a Rockefeller research grant, he served as founder and chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Islamic Cultural Centre in Beirut, as trustee of the Von Kremmer Foundation in Switzerland, and the Imperial Academy of Philosophy in Tehran, as chief advisor to the London-based World of Islam Trust, and as a member of the Steering Committee of King Abdel-Aziz University's Hajj Research Centre in Jeddah. He was often the first person that film makers or festival organizers would contact when embarked on major Middle Eastern projects and it was largely because of Ibish that the World of Islam Festival held in London in 1976 was such a memorable success.

His final task in this world was, from 1999, directorship of the Al-Fuqan Islamic Heritage Foundation at Eagle House, a beautifully restored Jacobean house in Wimbledon, London. Funded by the Yamani Cultural and Charitable Foundation,

set up and run by Aḥmad Zakī Yamānī (formerly the Saudi Arabian Oil Minister), Al-Furqan is a non-profit-making institute with global reach working to preserve Islamic manuscripts, and a research institute laying the bibliographic and lexical groundwork for a longed-for resurgence of Arab creativeness in science. Although its primary focus has been on the Arab world, in the past decade Al-Furqan has expanded its interest in Arabic manuscripts to include in its publications catalogues of Arabic manuscript collections in sub-Saharan Africa, such as the Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Historiques Ahmad Baba (CEDRAB) in Timbuktu, in five volumes; the Arabic collection of the National Archives of Kaduna (Nigeria), in two volumes; a single volume of manuscript collections in Senegal, and a similar one for Shinqīt and Wādān in Mauritania; and most recently a volume of such collections in Ghana. Furthermore, Al-Furqan, under Professor Ibish, sponsored an Arabic translation of volumes 1 and 2 of *Arabic Literature of Africa*, and will later publish them.

Yusuf Ibish is survived by one daughter and two sons. One of these sons, Hussein Ibish, is the Spokesman of the The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee in U.S.A.

John Hunwick & Mohamed Driouèche

[Next page contains a document prepared by John Hunwick, and sent to the Al-Furqan Foundation upon hearing of Yusuf Ibish's death]

إنا لله وإنا إليه راجعون

رحم الله الأستاذ العظيم الدكتور يوسف إيبش
وأدخله الجنة

قال الله تعالى:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا صَالِحَاتٍ أُؤْتُوا أَصْحَابَ الْجَنَّةِ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ.

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ وَإِنَّمَا تُوَفَّوْنَ أَجُورَكُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ

فَمَنْ زَحَرَ عَنِ النَّارِ وَأُدْخِلَ الْجَنَّةَ فَقَدْ فَازَ

وَمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا مَتَاعُ الْغُرُورِ

TIMBUKTU: A REFUGE OF SCHOLARLY AND RIGHTEOUS FOLK

[This article is a translation by John Hunwick of an Arabic article he wrote to be published in a volume dedicated to the memory of Professor Yusuf Ibish through the Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation]

Timbuktu's existence began at the end of the fifth century of the *hijra* (the beginning of the twelfth century AD), as a settlement for some nomads of the southern Sahara. This was described by the historian ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Saʿdī as follows:

Timbuktu was founded by the Maghsharan Tuareg towards the end of the fifth century of the *hijra*. They would come there in summer to graze their herds on the banks of the river at the village of Amadia where they encamped.¹ Then in the rainy season they would return northward by stages to Arawān their farthest point in the upper lands, and encamp there. Thus did they choose the location of this virtuous, pure, undefiled and proud city, blessed with divine favour, a healthy climate, and [commercial] activity. It is a city unsullied by the worship of idols, where none has prostrated save to God the Compassionate, a refuge of scholarly and righteous folk, a haunt of saints and ascetics, and a meeting place of caravans and boats.²

In fact the nomads who resided in that location were members of the Masūfa tribe, a branch of the group of tribes all known together as the Ṣanhāja—members of the Almoravid

1 Amadia is a location on the banks of the River Niger to the west of Kabara. In Arabic it is spelled: Amazāgha.

2 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Saʿdī, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, Arabic text ed. O. Houdas, Paris 1898, repr. 1964, 20-21; trans. J.O. Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, Leiden 1999, 29.

movement of the eleventh century. In the fifteenth century the most celebrated scholars of Timbuktu were from the Masūfa.

As for the settlement location of those nomads, known as Timbuktu, it was close to the river known as the Nile in medieval Arabic writings, and as the Niger beginning with the writing of Leo Africanus (al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Wazzān al-Zayyātī).³ Between the river and the city is a watercourse which only contains water in the flood season at the beginning of each year. To the north of Timbuktu are Saharan lands that stretch over to Morocco after the Touat oasis. Because of its geographical location Timbuktu became a centre for trade between tropical Africa (*bilād al-sūdān*) and the lands of the Mediterranean. Commercial links also came to exist between Timbuktu and the Saharan oases. On account of this Timbuktu became an attractive city for some individuals from North Africa and the oases.

In the year 1325, when Timbuktu was under the rule of Mali, the sultan of Mali, Mansā Mūsā, came there during his return from pilgrimage, and ordered the construction of a Great Mosque⁴ (until now still in existence in the south of the city) under the supervision of the Andalusian scholar Abū Ishāq al-Sāḥilī, who had accompanied Mansā Mūsā on his return journey from Mecca. Then after some years a large

3 The origin of his family was from Andalusia, and then they moved to Morocco. Al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad travelled a great deal in North Africa, and twice in West Africa in the early 16th century. And after his travel to Egypt, and on his way back to Morocco in 1518, he was captured by Sicilian corsairs in his ship in the Mediterranean. They took him to Rome where they presented him to Pope Leo X like a slave. A year later the Pope baptized him and gave him his own name (Leo). Later the name 'Africanus' was added to that. He remained in Rome for a long time, and wrote a book in Italian called *Discriptione dell'Africa*, which was published in 1550 as Part 7 of the book *Delle navigationi e viaggi*, compiled by G.B. Ramusio. There is an English translation of descriptions of his travels in West Africa in Hunwick's *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*.

4 Called in Songhay: Jingere Bēr.

mosque was built in the Sankore quarter in the north of the city, financed by a woman from the Aghlāl, a religious Tuareg tribe (of *ineslemen*). The Sankore mosque became a place for teaching *tafsīr* (Qurʾānic exegesis) and other Islamic teachings. Sankore was a dwelling place for many scholars, especially those belonging to the Masūfa.

One of the most important of them was a family known as Aqīt. Their ancestor Muḥammad Aqīt migrated from Māsina to Timbuktu around 1450, and his grandson Abū ʿl-Thanāʾ Maḥmūd became imam of the Sankore mosque, and afterwards became *qāḍī* of Timbuktu for fifty years, during which time he wrote a commentary on the *Mukhtaṣar* of Khalīl b. Iṣḥāq.⁵ After his death in 1548 he was succeeded as *qāḍī* of Timbuktu by his son Muḥammad until he himself died in 1565. Among the most important scholars of the Aqīt family were Aḥmad b. *al-ḥājj* Aḥmad b. ʿUmar b. Muḥammad Aqīt (d. 1583), and his son Aḥmad Bābā.

Aḥmad Bābā composed a very important book with the title *Nayl al-ibtihāj bi-taṭrīz al-Dībāj*, which is a collection of biographies of scholars of the Mālikī *madhhab*.⁶ It contains a description of his father as follows: ‘He was—may God have mercy upon him—a smart and understanding scholar, highly accomplished, knowledgeable and versatile—a specialist in *ḥadīth*, in jurisprudence, rhetoric and logic. In 956⁷ he travelled to the east, made pilgrimage and visited Medina. There he met a number of people, including al-Nāṣir al-Laḳānī, al-Sharīf Yūsuf al-Arambūtī, a pupil of al-Suyūtī, Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn al-Shaykh Zakariyyāʾ, al-Shaykh al-Tājūrī and al-Ujhūrī’.⁸ Pilgrimage and meeting with scholars in the Middle East was the practice of many scholars of Timbuktu, some of whom bought or copied manuscripts in the Islamic sciences.

5 The *Mukhtaṣar* is a famous book on law in the Mālikī *madhhab*.

6 The book is a supplement to *Dībāj al-mudhahhab* by Ibn Farḥūn.

7 1549-50.

8 See *Nayl al-ibtihāj*, 1st edn, Cairo 1351/1932-3, 92.

Aḥmad Bābā himself was celebrated and has been kept in mind until the present day. In 1970 in Timbuktu a centre for conserving manuscripts of the Timbuktu tradition was created using his name: Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Historiques Ahmad Baba. Aḥmad Bābā was born in 1556 and studied with his father and with his uncle, and then with Muḥammad Baghayogho al-Wangarī, a scholar who was not from the Aqīt family, but originated from the Juula, a Mande group who are both scholars and merchants. Muḥammad Baghayogho was born in Jenne, and migrated to Timbuktu along with his brother Aḥmad in his youth. He studied with Aḥmad Bābā's father, and then taught Aḥmad Bābā himself, who considered him to be his shaykh. He admired him tremendously, as is apparent from his description of him:

Our shaykh and our [source of] blessing, the jurist, and accomplished scholar, a pious and ascetic man of God, who was among the finest of God's righteous servants and practising scholars. He was a man given by nature to goodness and benign intent, guileless, and naturally disposed to goodness, believing in people to such an extent that all men were virtually equal in his sight, so well did he think of them and absolve them of wrongdoing. Moreover, he was constantly attending to people's needs, even at cost to himself, becoming distressed at their misfortunes, mediating their disputes, and advising them to have love for learning and to closely follow his teaching.

He spent most of his time doing this, with affection for those concerned, with his own utter humility, helping them and caring for them, and his lending them of the most rare and precious books without searching for them again, no matter what discipline they were in. Thus it was that he lost a [large] portion of his books—may God shower His beneficence upon him for that! Sometimes a student would come to the door of his house and send him a note listing a book he was looking for, and he would take it out of his library and despatch it to him without even knowing who the student was. In this matter he was truly astonishing, doing this for the sake of God Most High, despite his love for books and his zeal in acquiring them, whether by purchase or copying. One day I came to him asking for

books on grammar, and he hunted through his library and brought me everything he could find on the subject.⁹

This description of him is not just admiration; rather his word informs us of the existence of a large library in Timbuktu, and the distribution of it to students and scholars in that city.

The famous scholar Aḥmad Bābā spent the first half of his life in Timbuktu. Then after the occupation of Timbuktu by the troops of the Moroccan sultan Mūlāy Aḥmad al-Manṣūr al-Dhahabī in 1591 Aḥmad Bābā was expelled from Timbuktu and transferred to Marrakesh, where he remained until 1608. For two years he was in prison in Marrakesh, and after he was released he was forced to stay there. During he stay there he taught in the ‘Mosque of Nobles’ (*Jāmi^c al-Shurafā^o*), and was asked to give many *fatwās*. Among his students were the *qādī* of Fez Ibn Abī Nu^caym, the mufti of Meknes Aḥmad al-Zanātī, and the celebrated Andalusian historian Shihāb al-Dīn al-Maqqarī. Because of his reputation in teaching and writing, some Moroccans even claim that he was one of their scholars. After returning to the beloved city of his birth, he continued to teach and write, but whilst he was in Marrakesh he expressed his affection and longing for his city in the following verses:

O traveller to Gao, turn off to my city.
Murmur my name there and greet all my dear ones,
With scented salams from an exile who longs
For his homeland of loved ones, companions and neighbours.¹⁰

Aḥmad Bābā wrote more than sixty works, many of which were of jurisprudence, and some on grammar and syntax. One of his jurisprudential works was replies about slavery

9 *Nayl al-ibtihāj*, 341.

10 See Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr al-Ifrānī, *Nuzhat al-ḥādī bi-akhbār mulūk al-qarn al-ḥādī*, Casablanca 1998, 172.

entitled *Mi[°]rāj al-ṣu[°]ūd ilā nayl ḥukm mujallab al-sūd*.¹¹ In his reply he divided the lands of West Africa into two: lands of Muslims, and lands of ‘unbelievers’. He states that it is only permissible to enslave those who live in one of the lands of the ‘unbelievers’. He also opposed the claim that black Africans are descendants of Ham, son of Noah, and that they became black and slaves to his other sons, Shem and Japheth through Noah’s curse. Aḥmad Bābā’s talk on slavery remained remembered in West Africa for a long while after his death, and it was referred to by Shaykh [°]Uthmān b. Muḥammad Fodiye, the *jihād*ist of northern Nigeria in the early nineteenth century.

Among other scholars in Timbuktu in the same period were [°]Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sa[°]dī, who has been already mentioned, and another historian called Maḥmūd Ka[°]ti, who wrote *Ta[°]rīkh al-fattāsh fī akhbār al-buldān wa’l-juyūsh wa-akābir al-nās wa-dhikr waqā[°]i[°] al-Takrūr wa-[°]aḏā[°]im al-umūr wa-tafrīq ansāb al-[°]abīd min al-aḥrār*. Three sons of his completed it, and it was revised by a son of his daughter called Ibn al-Mukhtār, totally finished in 1665. The book is a history of the Songhay state from the mid-fifteenth century to near the end of the sixteenth (Maḥmūd Ka[°]ti died in 1592). This work also contains information on the states of Mali and Ghana. The origin of the Ka[°]ti family was from Toledo in Spain. Maḥmūd Ka[°]ti’s grandfather migrated from Toledo towards West Africa around 1468. This is evident from what he recorded on the last page of a manuscript of the book *al-Shifā[°] bi-ta[°]rīf ḥuqūq al-Muṣṭafā* by Qāḏī [°]Iyād, where the migrant mentioned the purchase of it in the oasis of Touat in 872 [AH], ‘two months after arriving there from our town of Toledo, the capital of the Goths, and now we are on our way to the land of the blacks (*bilād al-sūdān*), asking of God Most

11 Ed. Fāṭima Ḥarrāq, Rabat 2000 (Université Mohamed V: Publications de l’Institut des Études Africaines); English translation in the same publication by John Hunwick.

High that He should grant us repose there'.¹² It appears from that that he considered the zone of Timbuktu to be an attractive place for one in need of relaxation.

As we established in what has already been said, Timbuktu was a home for scholars in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; and indeed it remained so down to the twentieth century, and it was still an attractive city for scholars from the Sahara and from north-west Africa. One of the most significant migrants to Timbuktu in the twentieth century was Aḥmad b. al-Mubārak al-Tikinī, known as Abū 'l-A^crāf. His town of origin was Gulimīm in Dar^ca in southern Morocco. He was both a merchant and a scholar, loving books and collecting a large number of manuscripts after his arrival to Timbuktu in 1907. After he died in 1955, they were inherited by one of his sons, and around 1970 most of them were donated to the Aḥmad Bābā Centre which had just been founded. As for Abū 'l-A^crāf himself, he wrote approximately forty works, most of which were versifications or abridgements of works written by others. He has himself an important original work ressembling what Aḥmad Bābā wrote; that is *Izālat al-rayb wa'l-shakk wa'l-tafrīṭ fī dhikr al-'ulamā' al-mu'allifīn min ahl al-Takrūr wa'l-Ṣaḥrā' wa-Shinqīṭ*. It is like a supplement to *Nayl al-ibtihāj*, since its composition was about three hundred years after what Aḥmad Bābā wrote, and it contains biographies of scholars who lived in that long intermediary period. As for 'Takrūr', what is meant by it is the whole lands of Muslims in West Africa. Originally, a millenium ago, it was the name of a state on the bank of the river Senegal.

Among the scholars in the second half of the twentieth century was Aḥmad Bābēr al-Arawānī, who died in 1997. He also wrote a work on biographies of scholars: *al-Sa^cāda al-*

12 This manuscript is preserved in Timbuktu nowadays in a private library under the direction of Ismael Diadié Haïdara, who permitted me to publish this page of sale and translate it; see *SAJHS*, 12, 2001, 111-14.

abadiyya fī 'l-ta'rif bi-'ulamā' Tinbuktū al-bahiyya. Furthermore he wrote some historical works, for example: *Jawāhir al-ḥisān fī akhbār al-sūdān*,¹³ and *Ta'rīkh Azawād*, which is an edition with further material of a history of the Barābīsh tribe by Maḥmūd b. Daḥmān, Azawād being a Saharan area between Timbuktu and Araouan, a trading town, and the birthplace of Aḥmad Bābēr.

It is clear that Timbuktu was, and still is, a homeland for scholars, and one of the most important places in sub-Saharan Africa for Islamic knowledge. God willing, it will remain so. God bless its people.

13 Published, edited by al-Hādī al-Mabrūk al-Dālī, Ṭarāblus 2001.