

THE DEATH OF AḤMAD AL-RĪFĪ:
THE PASSING OF A GENERATION
IN SANŪSĪ HISTORY

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This letter¹ is one of thirty Arabic documents which constitute a new publication of African historical sources entitled ‘An Islamic Alliance: °Alī Dīnār and the Sanūsiyya, 1906-1916.’² The latter presents correspondence between the leaders of the Sanūsi brotherhood in southern Libya and °Alī Dīnār, king of the restored Sultanate of Dār Fūr (1898-1916). The unifying theme of this correspondence is the defense, by these Islamic leaders, of one of the last parts of the African continent—and of the African *Dār al-Islām*—to be brought under European colonial rule, a region which extended south from the Mediterranean coast of modern Libya for more than two thousand miles to embrace the kingdoms

- 1 We are grateful to M.I. Abū Salīm of the National Records Office for permission to publish this document.
- 2 Jay Spaulding and Lidwien Kapteijns, ‘An Islamic Alliance: °Alī Dīnār and the Sanūsiyya, 1906-1916,’ forthcoming. This book is part of a growing literature of primary sources relevant to Dār Fūr and the Sanūsiyya. See also, Knut S. Vikør, *Saint and Scholar on the Desert Edge: Muḥammad b. °Alī al-Sanūsī (1787-1859)*, Dr.philos. thesis, University of Bergen, 1991; Glauco Ciammaichella, *Libyens et Français au Tchad (1897-1914): La confrérie Senoussie et le commerce transsaharien*, Paris: CNRS, 1987; Lidwien Kapteijns and Jay Spaulding, *After the Millennium: Diplomatic Correspondence from Wadai and Dār Fūr on the Eve of Colonial Conquest, 1885-1916*, East Lansing: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1985; Helmut Klopfer, *Aspekte der Bewegung des Muḥammad Ben °Alī as-Sanūsī*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1967; R.S. O’Fahey and M.I. Abū Salīm, *Land in Dār Fūr: Charters and related documents from the Dār Fūr Sultanate*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983 and Jean-Louis Triaud, *Tchad 1900-1902: Une Guerre Franco-Libyenne Oubliée? Une confrérie musulmane, La Sanūsiyya, face à la France.*, Paris: Harmattan, 1987.

of Wadai in eastern Chad and Dār Fūr in the western Sudan.

The advance of European imperial powers on this region had intensified since the closing years of the nineteenth century. In 1898 the British lords of Egypt had overrun the Sudanese Nile valley. Although they had at least provisionally acknowledged ʿAlī Dīnār's sovereignty over Dār Fūr, their presence seriously curtailed the sultan's aspirations. In this same period the French had been advancing from the west and northwest. The troops which defeated Rābiḥ Faḍl Allāh in Kousseri in 1900 had hailed from Algiers, Dakar and Brazzaville; Rābiḥ's defeat left open the western approaches to the region under study here. In 1902 the French attacked the Sanūsī settlement at Bir Alalī (near the modern Chad-Niger border) and in 1909 they conquered the sultanate of Wadai, whose last independent ruler eventually surrendered in October 1911. Until 1911 the area which was to become Libya remained under loose Ottoman overlordship, but the real power of the land lay with the Sanūsī brotherhood, which since 1902 had been directed from Kufra by Aḥmad al-Sharīf, the grandson of its founder. The tensions in Europe which in 1914 would culminate in the outbreak of the First World War brought another European invader to the scene. In September 1911 Italy declared war on the Ottoman Empire; in October it bombarded and invaded the Libyan coastline. News of this invasion reached Kufra in December of that year. The current letter was written on 15 January 1912 by the head of the Sanūsīyya, Aḥmad al-Sharīf, in Kufra. There is evidence that the recipient of the letter, Sultan ʿAlī Dīnār, was under increasing European pressure as well, as he had to allow the French to eat away at the western marches of his kingdom so as not to provoke the anger of the British in the east.³

Aḥmad al-Sharīf's letter addresses a variety of issues, political, religious, commercial and personal. After the flowery opening

3 See A.B. Theobald, *ʿAlī Dīnār, Last Sultan of Darfur, 1898-1916* London: Longmans, 1965, 103 and Lidwien Kapteijns, *Mahdist Faith and Sudanic Tradition: The History of the Masālīt Sultanate, 1870-1930* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985, 194-6.

formulae which may be considered the Sanūsī trademark, Aḥmad al-Sharīf first dealt with business affairs. He confirmed the arrival in Kufra of °Alī Dīnār's large consignment of ivory and notified the king that it would be disposed of by his brother, Muḥammad °Ābid b. Muḥammad al-Sharīf. We know from other letters in this collection that the consignment was large (six-and-a-half *qinṭārs*),⁴ and that it was to be exchanged for ammunition. Although the transaction was completed locally, in Kufra, and in a very short period of time, this ammunition never reached °Alī Dīnār; it was used instead in Muḥammad °Ābid's campaign against the Italians in the Fazzān in 1914. In explaining some of the problems of this business transaction, Sayyid Aḥmad referred to the invasion of the Italians and its paralysing impact on the movement of goods and trade. As for political developments, it seems, Sayyid Aḥmad called back all the *ikhwān* in °Alī Dīnār's capital, including the two men mentioned by name towards the end of the letter, who are otherwise unknown to us. Aḥmad al-Sharīf concluded this first part of the letter by passing on to the sultan the greetings of his brother, Muḥammad °Ābid, and two of his paternal cousins, Muḥammad Idrīs and Muḥammad al-Riḍā, both sons of the Grand Sanūsī's son Muḥammad al-Mahdī.

In the second part of the letter Sayyid Aḥmad described in some detail the circumstances of the death, on 3 September 1911, of the elderly scholar and statesman Aḥmad al-Rīfī. At the time of his death, Aḥmad al-Rīfī was an old man, for 'the erudite Moroccan' (as Evans-Pritchard respectfully calls him)⁵ had been a companion of the Grand Sanusi and had been chosen by him as an instructor for his son, Muḥammad al-Mahdī, uncle and father of the young Sanūsī leaders figuring in this letter. For the latter, the death of this last prominent (and personally close) member of the generation of the brotherhood's founding fathers truly marked

4 *Qinṭār*, unit of weight. An Egyptian *qinṭār* of the early twentieth century weighed 44,928 kg.; the contemporary *qinṭār* of Tripoli weighed 51,282 kg.

5 E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1949, 19.

the passing of a generation. Aḥmad al-Sharīf's account of Aḥmad al-Rifī's death is intimate and personal, but it also establishes beyond a shadow of doubt that the venerable teacher had singled out him, Aḥmad al-Sharīf, as the recipient of his religious authority and *baraka* (blessing). That Sayyid Aḥmad felt the need to convey this after having directed the affairs of the brotherhood for ten years is a tribute to Aḥmad al-Rifī's standing and prestige. Sayyid Aḥmad acknowledged in passing the receipt of the silver coins which °Alī Dīnār had sent to settle his account with al-Rifī. They were handed over, another letter tells us, to his grandson Aḥmad.

Aḥmad al-Sharīf concluded the letter by raising two issues. First, he blessed °Alī Dīnār and wished him well in his efforts 'to cut the throats of the faction of the depraved, deceitful unbelievers,' the Europeans and their local allies. Undoubtedly the 'fragrant salutations and flowering greetings' of Sayyid Aḥmad must not be taken too literally, as they represent contemporary diplomatic conventions. However, his cry that 'the unbelievers are pouring in everywhere' and that 'there is not a king on the face of the earth except for you,' was correct in the context of regional geopolitical realities and has the ring of emotional authenticity. After such a strong statement of religious and political purpose, the Sanūsī leader's request for three slave girls is, to the modern reader, maybe somewhat anti-climactic. °Alī Dīnār obliged Sayyid Aḥmad, our sources tell us, as he was thanked for doing so in a later, undated, letter.⁶

In the years that led up to, and followed the outbreak of the First World War, relations between the Sanūsīyya and °Alī Dīnār grew even closer. Together with the other items of the correspondence, this present letter gives evidence that there existed a real, passionately felt alliance between the two, balanced in reciprocity according to changing historical vicissitudes. By 1914, however, °Alī Dīnār was only two years away from his definitive

6 There survives a letter in which Aḥmad al-Sharīf, as a young man in Gouro in 1901, sent a similar request south to the commander of the *zāwiya* (lodge) at Bir Alali; see Triaud, *Tchad 1900-1902*, Doc. 10, 107-9.

defeat at the hands of British troops. His death marked the end of the Dār Fūr Sultanate. Aḥmad al-Sharīf continued to direct the Sanūsiyya until his exile in 1918. When he died in 1933, the Italians were firmly in the saddle in their North African colony. Family fortunes, however, were to take a turn for the better at Libya's independence in 1951, when Muḥammad Idrīs, Sayyid Aḥmad's paternal cousin who figures in this letter, became independent Libya's first king.

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم حضرة عالى الهمه مشرف الراى
 فى كل مدلهمة ذى الهممة التى لا تخبو والمحاسن التى لا
 تنبو حضرة / السلطان على دينار ابن السلطان فضل ابن
 السلطان زكرياء لا زالت ايامه مواسم ولياله (مباسم)⁷
 ءامين وبعد اهداء تحيات عاطره وتسليمات زاهره الي المقام
 الذى يجب احترامه و(يتأكد) ⁸ / اعظامه فان المواجب له
 السؤال عن تلك المكارم التى هى لزهر الربا كمائم ادام الله
 علاها / وجعل من تقواه حلاها وقد تقدم للحضرة منا
 كتب قبل هذا وفيها ما يغنى عن الاعاده وذكرنا / للجناب
 فى الاخير وصول القادمين من الطرف السعيد وان الامانة
 التى ارسلتموها لحضرتكم على / يد صنونا السيد محمد

7 Lacuna, conjectural reading.

8 Lacuna, conjectural reading.

عابد قضاها بهذا الطرف لتعذر قضائها فى المهاجر البحريه
 باستيلاء عدو (الله)⁹ / الطليان عليها وهم الان معه فى
 محاربة ومحاصره والله يعز الاسلام ويهلك الكفرة (اللغام)
¹⁰ / والقادم الى الطرف السعيد الاخ غيث يخبركم
 بالاحوال شفاها وعسى بقية اخواننا الذين / هناك على
 وصول الينا فلا تحتاج مراحمكم الشريفه الى التاكيد على
 ارسالهم الينا والله تعالى ييسر / كل امر عسير ويسمعنا
 عن الحضرة ما يسر ولا زال الدعاء منا لذلك الجناب مبذولا
 والله يتولاه (...)¹¹ / مقبولا ومنا اتم السلام وازكاه وانما
 يهدى لمن حواه المقام من الانجال الكرام ومن (عندنا)¹² /
 صنونا السيد محمد عابد والسيد محمد ادريس والسيد
 محمد رضا وكافة الاخوه يهدون للحضرة كامل التحية
 والدعوات (الخيرية) / والسلام تاريخ ٢٥ محرم (الحرام)¹³
 // سنه / ١٣٣٠ //

9 Lacuna, conjectural reading.

10 Lacuna, conjectural reading.

11 Lacuna; a hole was punctured in the paper here.

12 Lacuna, conjectural reading.

13 Lacuna, conjectural reading.

المقتبس النور

القدوسى احمد ابن

السيد الشريف

السنوسى

١٣٢١

وقد تقدم لحضرة جانبكم كتاب ذكرنا لكم فيه العزاء /
 على استاذى وملاذى سيدى ومولا وقطب / محيى
 وواسطتى عند استاذى ووسيلتى / الى رسولى ومولاي
 سيدى السيد احمد الريفى / رضى الله عنه وارضاه وانالنا
 رضاه بحرمة / حبيبه ومصطفاه صلى الله عليه وسلم
 وشرف / وعظم وكان ابتداء المرض الذى توفى فيه / ليلت
 الثلاثا ٤ رمضان المعظم وفى صبحيه / ذلك اليوم بعد
 طلوع الفجر ارسل لى ولما / دخلت عليه وصبحت عليه
 بالخير قال لى ما / خفت الا ان يصي بى شئ وانت غايب
 / ثم اوصانى بما اراد وفى يوم الاحد ٩ رمضان لما / جئت
 لصلاة الصبح وجدته جالسا فصبحت / عليه وقبلت يده
 الشريفه وصلينا الصبح وبعد / ها اضطجع وجلست عند

راسه قليلا ثم خرجت / وفى الضحى رجعت وجدته فى
 النزع الى قرب / الظهر ففارقت الروح ذلك الجسد العظيم
 / وتلقاها الملك المامور بالترحيب والتعظيم / رضى الله
 عنه وارضاه وجعل الفردس¹⁴ منزله / ومثواه فعظم الله لنا
 ولكم فيه الاجر والبركه // ان شاء الله فى اولاده / وقد
 اجازنى ولله الحمد / اجازة تامه مطلقة / عامه قايللا لى
 اجزتك / بجميع ما اجازنى به / الاستاذ رضى الله عنه /
 بكل ما يصح له و(عنه)¹⁵ / واسمعنى المسلسلات /
 وصافحنى وشابكنى / وناولنى السبحة و¹⁶ / واخذت عنه
 ولله / الحمد علوما جمه / وفنوننا تمه جزاه / الله عنا وعن
 كافة / امة محمد صلى الله عليه / وسلم خيرا نعم وما /
 ارسلتموه لنا وله / من الدراهم وصل / وبالقبول اتصل /
 وما قصرتم لا سابقا / ولا لاحقا فجزاكم / احسن الجزاء
 واثابكم / من فيض فضله بما / تقربه الاعين يوم / الجزاء
 ثم المطلوب من / مكارمكم بمجرد وصول / الجواب اليكم
 / ان توجهو لنا ولدنا // احمد العايريه وولدنا بشيرا فاننا

14 Spelled as shown.

15 Lacuna, conjectural reading.

16 Dittography or lacuna.

فى غاية / الانتظار لهم فالله يديم بقاءكم ويقهر /
 اعداءكم ومحى بسيفكم رقاب الطائفة / الكافره الخاسرة
 الماكره فان الكفر قد عم / وطم ولم يكن اليوم ملك على
 وجه الارض / غيركم فقد اعربتم الدين وقهرتم الملحدين /
 يجزاكم الله احسن الجزاء ثم المطلوب من / مكارمكم ان
 ترسلوا لنا مع الاخ غيث / ثلاثه جوار جميلات فاحسانكم
 عام وما / كان منكم التقصير ولا يكون والسلام يعم /
 جنابكم والانجال الكرام فى البدء والختام

Translation

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

To the presence of him who is lofty of aspiration, noble of view, who in [every] gloomy [situation] displays a zeal that does not die out, and good qualities that do not go away, his majesty Sultan °Alī Dīnār, son of Sultan Faḍl,¹⁷ son of Sultan Zakariyā°. May his days continue to be festive and his nights smiling. Amen.

After the bestowal of fragrant salutations and flowering greetings to the eminence who commands respect and whose greatness is confirmed. The purpose of it is to inquire about these noble traits which are perianths for the flowers of the fragrant bushes—may God prolong their ascendance, and make of his godfearingness their sweetness. Your majesty has already received letters from us before this, and their contents do not need repeating. We mentioned to your majesty in the last

17 This is incorrect. He was the son of Zakariyā° and the grandson of Faḍl.

[letter] the arrival of those coming from the south. [As for] the consignment your majesty sent for yourself by the hand of our twin brother Sayyid Muḥammad °Ābid, he has disposed of it here, for it is impossible to dispose of it in the settlements of the coast, because of their conquest by God's enemy the Italians. At present they are engaged in war and blockade with him. May God strengthen Islam and destroy the vile unbelievers! The one who is coming to the south, Brother Ghayth, will inform you of the situation orally. It would be appropriate if the rest of our brethren who are there were to come to us. Nothing is needed from your noble mercy except for reassurance that they will be dispatched to us. May God Most High make easy every difficult matter, and make us hear about your majesty that which gives joy. May our prayers for [your] excellency never cease, and may He arrange for [. . .] to be accepted. From us come the most complete, purest, and numerous greetings for those among the noble offspring who belong to your high station. Here our twin brother Sayyid Muḥammad °Ābid, Sayyid Muḥammad Idrīs and Sayyid Muḥammad Riḍā and all the brothers offer to [your] majesty perfect salutations and benevolent prayers. Farewell. The date is 25 Muḥarram *al-ḥarām*¹⁸ in the year 1330 [15 January 1912].

He who has acquired the Most Holy Light
Aḥmad b. al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Sanūsī
 1321 [1903-4]

Your majesty has already received a letter in which we told you about the mourning for my teacher and my refuge, my lord and master, the focal point¹⁹ of my existence and mediator with my *ustādh* [Muḥammad b. °Alī al-Sanūsī] and my intermediary to my apostle and master, my lord al-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Rifī. May God be pleased with him and reward him, and give us His favor through the sanctity of his beloved and chosen one, may God bless him and grant him peace, and give him honor and greatness.

18 *Al-ḥarām*: a common epithet of the month of Muḥarram.

19 *Qutb*: mystical epithet applied by Ṣūfīs to the leading mystic of each generation; pole or mystic axis of the world (*ET* (1), IV, 684).

The beginning of the illness from which he died was on the Tuesday night, the fourth of Ramaḍān *al-muʿazzam*²⁰ [29 August 1911]. On the morning of that day, after sunrise, he sent for me. When I came in to him and said good morning, he said to me: ‘I have only been afraid that something would happen to me while you were absent.’ Then he charged me with what he wanted done. On Sunday the ninth of Ramaḍān [3 September 1911], when I came for the morning prayer, I found him seated. I said good morning to him, kissed his noble hand, and we prayed the morning prayer. After that he reclined, and I sat for a little while by his head, then went out. In the forenoon I returned, and found him in the throes of death until almost noon. Then the spirit departed that great body, and was encountered by the angel charged with welcoming and elevating [the dead]. May God be pleased with him and reward him, making paradise his home and his resting place. May God increase through him, as well as through his children, if God wills, our reward and blessing, and yours. God be praised, he had already authorized me with a complete authority,²¹ unrestricted and general, saying to me: ‘I give to you authorization over everything over which the *ustādh* [Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Sanūsī]—may God be pleased with him—gave me authorization, with all its rights and duties.’ He made me listen to *al-Musalsalāt*.²² He clasped my hand, gave me the handshake²³ and handed me the prayer beads. I took them from him, God be praised, and an abundance of knowledge and complete skills. May God reward him well for us, and for all the nation of Muḥammad, may God bless him and grant him peace.

Indeed. The *dirhams* which you sent to us and him have arrived, and have been received. With us you never fall short, past or present. May God give you the best of rewards. May He

20 *Al-muʿazzam*: a common epithet of the month of Ramaḍān.

21 The concept is *ijāza*. See M. Th. Houtsma, art. ‘Idjāza’, *EI* (1), IV, 667.

22 *Al-Musalsalāt al-ʿashara fī ʿl-aḥādīth al-nabawiyya*, a work by Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Sanūsī concerning sound and false chains of succession from the prophet Muḥammad. See Klopfer, *Aspekte*, 68-9.

23 *Muṣāfaḥa*: a special handshake under the sleeve of the *shaykh*, commonly used in the vow of allegiance. See J. Spencer Trimmingham, *Islam in the Sudan*, London 1965, 206.

repay you from the flood of His abundance with that which is a joy to the eyes on the Day of Reckoning.

What is requested from your noble person is that as soon as this letter arrives you dispatch to us our son Aḥmad al-ʿĀyariyya and our son Bashīr, for we are awaiting them with great anticipation. May God lengthen your existence and give you victory over your enemies. May He with your sword cut the throats of the faction of the depraved, deceitful unbelievers. For truly the unbelievers are pouring in everywhere; these days there is not a king on the face of the earth except for you. You have proclaimed the religion and defeated the apostates; may God reward you with the best of rewards.

What is asked of your noble person is to send to us with Brother Ghayth three pretty slave girls.

Your beneficence is comprehensive and with us you have never, and will never, fall short. May peace embrace your excellency and the most noble offspring at the beginning and the end.