

Emir Abdelkader of Algeria: Intellectual Legacy, Sufism, and Poetic Identity

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Abstract

Emir Abdelkader of Algeria was a refined poet, a profoundly learned scholar, a creative author, and an eloquent writer who emerged in an era enshrouded in darkness. He drew his sword against French colonialism, mounted his steed, chanting his feats in verse, immortalizing them in his poetry and celebrating them through song. His genius embodied all the virtues advocated by the Islamic faith. His talents manifested at an early age, ranging from mastery of horsemanship and swordsmanship to intelligence, quick wit, courage, profound knowledge, political acumen, literary creativity, and a heartfelt devotion to Allah, the Creator of the universe. From this perspective, our interest in the figure of Emir Abdelkader arose. Through this study, we seek to shed particular light on the spiritual and poetic dimensions of his life.

Keywords: Emir Abdelkader; thought; Sufism; poetry; identity.

Introduction

Many have spoken of the Emir as a prestigious figure and a man of modernity and renaissance—a personality saturated with capabilities, for he began his life in a household of knowledge and righteousness. The cultural, religious, and faith-based educational environment in which he was raised influenced the psychological, intellectual, and socio-political formation of his personality.

When Algeria suffered the ordeal of occupation and uprisings erupted, the young Abdelkader found himself and his family in a position of responsibility to undertake the duty of jihad to repel the French aggression. After his allegiance as Emir, he began to think about establishing the Algerian state with its capital in the city of Mascara. He founded his state on the foundations of justice and modern organization, drafted a constitution, minted coins in its name, established factories and workshops for the manufacture of weapons and clothing, and began organizing his army in preparation for war with the colonial enemy. This is what is known about the Emir, founder of the new Algerian state. However, in this research, we have chosen to unveil a particular aspect of his life: that of the Sufi poet. He authored numerous books, including *The Sharp Scissors to Cut the Tongue of Those Who Disparage the Islamic Religion with Falsehood and Atheism*, and the book *Al-Mawaqif fi al-Wa'z wa al-Irshad* (Stances on Exhortation and Guidance), in which he urges the fight against heresies and their proponents. He also has a poetic diwan in which he collected a number of eloquent poetic compositions that parallel classical Arabic poetry. This is in addition to what was published by his son, Emir Muhammad, in his book *Tuhfat al-Za'ir* (The Visitor's Gift), comprising letters, poems, news, and scientific and literary traces.

Description of Emir Abdelkader of Algeria

Emir Abdelkader of Algeria is a prominent figure in human history, combining all the virtues advocated by the Islamic faith. His talents manifested at an early age, combining the etiquette of study with the etiquette of the self, and mastery of various types of horsemanship and swordsmanship, along with intelligence, quick wit, knowledge, political acumen, literary creativity, and a devotional love for the Creator of this universe. The Algerian historian Abdelrahman al-Jilali said of him: "His father was the one who undertook his upbringing by hand, then entrusted him to the scholars of Ghriss, then he began to frequent the circles of knowledge in Oran. In the year (1242 AH – 1827 CE), he accompanied his father on the Hajj pilgrimage, touring with him the major capitals of the Middle East. He traveled from Tunis to Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, and the Hijaz, where he became acquainted with major scientific, religious, and political personalities. God granted him excessive intelligence, broad-mindedness, and quickness of mind, which made these individuals marvel at him, until he became proverbial among them for precocity and subtlety of feeling. Among the celebrities of the East from whom he learned during this journey were Sheikh Abdullah al-Kazabri, Imam of Damascus and its traditionist; Diya' al-Din Khalid al-Naqshbandi al-Sahrawardi; and Sheikh Mahmud al-Qadiri, Naqib of the Ashraf of Baghdad, among others." (Abdelrahman al-Jilali, 2010, p. 281)

The German historian Carl Brockelmann observed in his book *History of Human Peoples* that Emir Abdelkader was a young adventurer, a brave warrior, a skilled horseman, a genius commander, an inspiring orator, a prudent organizer, and a protector and savior of Islam. He was the son of one of the murabitun, performed the Hajj pilgrimage twice, and the tribes of Hashim and Amir—after growing weary of continuous conflict—placed themselves under his command despite his young age, as he was no more than twenty-two years old... He then assumed the title of Amir al-Mu'minin and called for jihad against the French. (Brockelmann, 1968, pp. 622–627)

Eugénie de Sivry described him, saying: "His attire is characterized by much dignity, his gait and movements are measured. His temperament contains much good manners, and he is generally affectionate. His bearing, appearance, and everything about him exude refinement, calm, nobility, and majesty."

Charles Henry Churchill said of Emir Abdelkader: "His clothing was simple and plain, and nothing but his weapons showed ornamentation. His long Tunisian rifle was studded with silver, and his pistol was studded with jewels. His Damascene sword was sheathed in a scabbard of silver. These accoutrements, along with the gifts bestowed upon his person, gave his appearance an awe that is difficult to express." (Churchill, 2015, p. 56)

He had a prominent participation in political and scientific life. He taught at the Umayyad Mosque and played a significant role in saving the blood of Christians following the bloody sectarian strife that occurred in the Levant in 1860. He sheltered Christians fleeing from massacres committed by quasi-military Druze and Muslim groups in collusion with the Ottoman military authorities, which lasted three days and during which twenty-five thousand Christians were killed. Due to his stances in defense of

human rights and the protection of foreign communities regardless of their nationalities, he received medals, decorations, and valuable gifts.

Emir Abdelkader died and was buried next to Sheikh Ibn Arabi in al-Salihiyya, Damascus, according to a will he left. After independence, his body was transferred to Algeria in 1965 and buried in the Al-Alia Cemetery in the Martyrs' Square, where major national figures are interred. The writer al-Adhami al-Tarabulsi composed a long elegy for the Emir, from which we excerpt these verses: (Al-Amira Badi'a, 2001, p. 234)

*The law of his noble deeds
Spreads fragrance in the world like a garden
God has decreed annihilation upon creation
This world is no abode of permanence
My master Abdelkader al-Hasani
And Abdelkader al-Jilani after the caliphs
He has a station in all sciences
That has made him the most learned of scholars*

Emir Abdelkader as a Poet

Emir Abdelkader was renowned for horsemanship and literature, translating himself by saying: (Al-Jilali, 2010, p. 281)

*My hand inclines from sword to pen
And glory is of two kinds: the sword and the pen*

The Emir was a refined poet, a creative author, and an eloquent writer. His son Muhammad collected a poetry diwan for him, published under the title: *Nuzhat al-Khatir fi Qarid al-Amir Abdelkader*, printed in Beirut and reprinted in Tlemcen in 1952. It was then edited, annotated, and published by Dr. Mamduh Haqqi at the beginning of 1960. The publisher's dedication reminded readers of the Emir's virtues and merits: "I republish it and dedicate it to the free people everywhere, and to remind the French who slaughter our brothers in Algeria of Emir Abdelkader, who protected the sons of their religion, and to show them the great difference between a noble enemy and a vile one." (The Emir, *Diwan of Emir Abdelkader of Algeria*, 1960)

Through these pages, we shall endeavor to cast some light on the poetic experience of Emir Abdelkader, by tracing the most important themes he addressed, with the aim of revealing the most salient characteristics that marked this experience. This is in view of the breadth and depth of the Emir's experience, particularly its Sufi aspect, which requires independent studies in its own right.

His poetry rested on two fundamental points: horsemanship and his Islamic culture. These two motivations likely gave the Emir's poetry its religious orientation, as he boasts, praises, describes, and expresses amatory verse.

The Poem of the Bedouin and the Sedentary

A poem of thirty-five verses, in which the Emir begins with verses condemning those who are ignorant of the beauty of Bedouin life and dwell in houses of stone, saying: (The Emir, *Diwan of Emir Abdelkader of Algeria*, 1960, p. 22)

*O excuser of one who is enamored of the city
And O reproacher of the lover of the desert and the wilderness
Do not condemn houses whose burdens are light
And praise houses of clay and stone
Had you known what is in the Bedouin life, you would excuse me
But you are ignorant, and how much harm is in ignorance*

He then transitions to describing the beauty of nature at night and day, and the pleasure of hunting expeditions, saying: (The Emir, *Diwan of Emir Abdelkader of Algeria*, 1960, p. 23)

*We go out hunting at times, so we seek it
For hunting is, for us, a constant state of alert
How many a dark night have we spent in pursuit
Even if it be a bird in the sky like a falcon
We chase beasts and gazelles, pursuing them
Into the distance, and none escape from the lean ones*

The Bedouin were distinguished by their nomadism in search of pastures for their livestock. We find the Emir depicting this scene, boasting of the bravery of their horsemen and describing their horses and their strength. This refers us to the Emir's culture and his narration of Arabic poetry, such as al-Mutanabbi's description of his horses, making them swift pursuers of beasts, unaffected by fatigue from travel, as he says (Al-Mutanabbi, 1979, p. 10):

*And horses that, when they pass by a beast or a meadow
Refuse its grazing unless our cooking pot is boiling*

And for their strength, they cross water like ships, carrying their rider, so much so that when they are exhausted and have hunted their beasts, as al-Mutanabbi says: (Al-Mutanabbi, 1979, p. 305)

*How many a deep sea has been made a ship for them
And the bachelor of the meadow has met his death*

And the Emir says: (The Emir, *Diwan of Emir Abdelkader of Algeria*, 1960, pp. 25–26)

*Ships of the land, nay safer for their rider
Than ships of the sea, how much danger is in them
We have steeds that the antelope cannot match in speed
And with horses we attain every glory
Our horses are always saddled for war
Whoever seeks help from us, his good fortune is victory*

General Eugène Daumas translated the poem "The Bedouin and the Sedentary" into French. He had extensive knowledge of the Arabic language, which enabled him to communicate directly with the Emir. This poem has an amusing story: while the Emir was residing in his exile at the Château d'Amboise, a question circulated in the salons of Paris, repeated by writers, poets, senior officers, and other notables of the city: "Where is life more pleasant? In the countryside or in the city?" General Daumas wrote to Emir Abdelkader, with whom relations were marked by trust and respect, to pose the same question to him, knowing beforehand the Emir's choice, given what he knew of his love for the Bedouin life in which

he was born and raised, a lover of horseback riding since childhood, and fond of contemplation under tents in the vigor of youth. (Boualam Bessaïh, 2010, p. 107)

The Emir also has a poem of thirty verses that he wrote after settling in Bursa, the city he chose for his exile because he heard it resembled Tlemcen. Khalil Pasha, brother-in-law of the Ottoman Sultan Abdülmecid, received him, and he proceeded in a magnificent procession to the palace prepared for him in the Mahkama neighborhood. From it, these verses: (Al-Amira Badi'a, 2001, p. 82)

*Praise be to God, in magnification and veneration
How ease comes after hardship
The breezes of musk have come, effacing
The tribulations, in their various forms
And I thank God that my life was not cut short
Before I joined the people of religion*

In this poem, the Emir shows all appreciation, respect, and love for the Ottoman Caliph, expressing his happiness at the hospitality and honor he received, and thanking God for this. He stayed in Bursa for two years with one hundred emigrants from his family and brothers, women and children. Then, after nostalgia intensified, he said: (Al-Amira Badi'a, 2001, p. 75)

*My heart refused to forget the places of Bursa
And my love for it has settled in my ribs
I bid it farewell, alas my heart after it
And left it while my heart remained behind, attached to it*

The Emir addressed various poetic themes in his poetry. He said in wisdom: (Badi'a, 2012, p. 337)

*Not every noble who claims precedence is truthful
If he precedes to the field, loss is his
And not everyone who mounts a steed is a horseman
When the dust of war rises and the atmosphere is dusty*

For wisdom in the Emir's poetry is the secret of its immortality, for he combined in it the essence of his culture, his life experience, and the experience of the scholars who preceded him from whose knowledge he drank. It is no wonder that the Emir took pride in his authentic Arab-Islamic heritage, and no wonder that he chose Quranic structures and expressions and traditional idioms drawn from the conservative Arab environment that preserved Islamic values.

Dr. Zakariyya Siyam conducted a valuable lengthy study on the Emir's poetry, in which he said: "Emir Abdelkader was able to combine authenticity and renewal in his poetry, and the breadth of his artistic, historical, religious, and social horizons enabled him to have a pioneering experience that placed him at the forefront of poets." (Siyam, 1983)

The Emir has much poetry of boasting, in which he expresses what he and his army witnessed of devastating battles with the French army. He says in the poem of Umm al-Banin: (Badi'a, 2012, p. 338)

*Ask the army of the Franks, and learn
That their fates are by my sword and my troops*

*Ask the night how many times I have torn its veil
Over one lean of flank, tall and erect*

And in amatory poetry, he has beautiful poems, all dedicated to his cousin and wife, whom he called Umm al-Banin. Among them is a poem the Emir wrote in a poem he sent from Istanbul to his wife in Bursa, expressing his longing for her: (The Emir, *Diwan of Emir Abdelkader of Algeria*, 1960, p. 44)

*I say to my beloved who remained behind me
Alas for the pains of separation and distance
Were you truly to see my longing*

You would find the matter easy, so intense is my passion

Emir Abdelkader the Sufi

The Emir was interested in heritage books such as *Al-Shifa* by Qadi Iyad, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* by al-Ghazali, *Al-Fusus* and *Al-Futuh al-Makkiyya* by Ibn Arabi, *Al-Risala* by Imam Muhammad ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani, and others, from which he drew his knowledge, due to his great need for them in his position to confront the inherited backwardness in his country on the one hand, and to face the intellectual and practical confrontation on the other, especially after the French invasion of Algeria, whose greatest goal was to spread backwardness and distorted ideas of the Islamic creed. He was influenced by Sheikh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah and admired his works and his courage in expressing opinions that he openly declared.

The Emir believed in Islamic Sufism as a path to renewing religious understanding and a style of life. Suffice it from his traces his precious scientific book *Al-Mawaqif fi al-Wa'z wa al-Irshad* (Stances on Exhortation and Guidance), which is dominated by a Sufi character, influenced in it by the method and style of the great Sufi sage Sheikh Muhyi al-Din ibn Arabi in *Al-Futuh al-Makkiyya*. It was first printed in Bulaq (1329 AH – 1911 CE) in three volumes, and he composed it at the insistence of a number of virtuous scholars. Jawad Murabit says: "Sheikh Abdelrazzaq al-Bitar was the first to suggest to the Emir that he record what he mentions in his sessions." (Jawad, 1966) It contains interpretation of verses from the Holy Quran, explanation of Prophetic hadiths, and exposition of Islamic creed in a sublime Sufi style. He also has the book *Risalat al-Miqraz al-Hadd li-Qat' Lisan Man Tanqasu Din al-Islam bi-al-Batil wa al-Ilhad* (The Sharp Scissors to Cut the Tongue of Those Who Disparage the Islamic Religion with Falsehood and Atheism), which is printed. And his magnificent book that he wrote under the title *Dhikra al-'Aqil* (The Remembrance of the Intelligent), in which he investigates philosophical problems and issues in religion, language, economics, history, and human races, translated into French by J. Dugat and published in 1858.

The Sufis were known for *khalwa* (spiritual retreat), which is perhaps the preparation of the soul, the arrangement of thoughts, and the organization of ranks. Thus, *khalwa* in this manner is a contemplative strategy for arranging thoughts. In this context, we mention the Emir's approach to *khalwa*. Researcher Abdelbaqi Miftah says: "The Emir soon traversed the stages of spiritual wayfaring under the supervision of his sheikh in the Two Holy Sanctuaries, where he spent a year and a half devoted to *dhikr* (remembrance), orientation, and worship in retreats during which he was cut off in the remembrance of the name of the Almighty (Allah). His first retreat was in the Cave of Hira on Jabal al-Nur... He settled in Medina, where he embarked on another retreat that lasted two months... His son Muhammad says that

he entered Medina on 26 Rajab 1280 AH and took up residence close to the wall of the Mosque. The Emir was cut off in that blessed place for a period of two months, by which his knowledge was strengthened, and Quranic truths and Prophetic hadiths were unveiled to him... The Emir continued to perform his litanies in retreat and presence without slackening in that." (Emir Abdelkader, 2005, p. 19) This retreat afforded him the opportunity for patience, contemplation, and calm, deep thought, especially after the distress he suffered in many of the circumstances he passed through. He says: "I once entered a retreat, and when I entered it, my soul was broken, the horizons narrowed upon me, and I lost my heart. And behold: knowledge became ignorance, intimacy became estrangement, pleasantries became quarrels, and conversation became dispute. My day was night, and my night was woe and ruin... And whatever proximity I sought, I was repelled by it, so nothing remained with me of the types of prayer, and this was the trial." (The Emir, *Al-Mawaqif fi al-Wa'z wa al-Irshad*, 2009, p. 471)

He who grew up in an educational religious environment, the son of *zawiyas* and mosques, also took the Qadiriyya path in Baghdad from the Naqib of the Ashraf, Sayyid Mahmud al-Kilani al-Qadiri, and this had a prominent effect on the course of his intellectual and religious life.

In addition to the Emir Abdelkader's prestigious status in Damascus, he led the life of a Sufi poet. We find in his choice of Damascus as a residence until death a valid reason, where he assumed a position befitting him as a political, religious, literary, and poetic leader. His fame had preceded him, so he took his place among scholars and notables.

Emir Abdelkader sees Sufism as "the jihad of the soul in the path of God, that is, for the sake of knowing God and bringing the soul under the divine commands, and tranquility and submission to the rulings of Lordship, for nothing else other than the path of God." (The Emir, *Al-Mawaqif fi al-Wa'z wa al-Irshad*, 2009, p. 141) He warns those whose worship is "tainted with selfish motives and carnal desires," correcting some concepts that had been attached to them in his era, the period of backwardness and the dominance of superstitions. For Sufism, in his view, is not "those who eat fire and insert iron nails into their jaws, and enter the oven and walk riding on people's shoulders to be recognized by the common people... For what emanates from these is partly sleight of hand, partly natural properties inherited among them." (The Emir, *Al-Mawaqif fi al-Wa'z wa al-Irshad*, 2009, p. 678)

In Sufism, there are states and stations, in which the gnostics vary according to their knowledge of their Lord and according to the obedience of the soul and its transformation of its attributes. For he considers the soul obedient to the wayfarer: "Were it not for the existence of the soul, no wayfarer would have journeyed to the presence of the Truth, nor reached it. It is the veil at a distance, and it is the connector to its Lord, and his means to Him." (The Emir, *Al-Mawaqif fi al-Wa'z wa al-Irshad*, 2009, p. 39) For the spiritual journey cannot be undertaken except by leaving behind the soul that commands evil, and abandoning the delusion of the intellect. The Emir says in this regard: (The Emir, *Al-Mawaqif fi al-Wa'z wa al-Irshad*, 2009, p. 14)

*Leave the existence of the soul and you will attain the graces
And abandon the delusion of the intellect, for it is the prison*

He describes the Sufis, or the gnostics, or the people of God, as "those close to God, exalted be He, the spiritual closeness, and those brought near to Him... Those who answer His call, who respond to His obedience... Those who call to His knowledge and His unity on the path of Sufism, the people of reality and wayfaring and states... Who cut through the obstacles of souls and traverse the stations to the highest peak." (The Emir, *Al-Mawaqif fi al-Wa'z wa al-Irshad*, 2009, pp. 302–303) The Emir has poetry in divine love, in which he expresses his love for God in eloquent, beautiful language, which is not strange for a brilliant talent refined by the language of the Arabic Quran. He says: (The Emir, *Diwan of Emir Abdelkader of Algeria*, 1960, p. 158)

*Neither proximity heals me, nor distance avails
And in our closeness is a passion that has made me enamored
My longing increases whenever I increase in proximity
And my ecstasy increases whenever I increase in knowledge*

The Emir resorted to the language of symbolic allusion in Sufi expression and his divine love, for Sufi poetry at the Emir is characterized by its amatory and wine-bearing inclinations.

As the Emir expressed in one of his poems about the divine wine, mentioning its antiquity that dates back to before Kisra, and it is a wine that does not intoxicate, saying: (The Emir, *Diwan of Emir Abdelkader of Algeria*, 1960, p. 208)

*Aged before Kisra, preserved
Neither contained in a wineskin nor attained by pressing
Nor has a wineskin touched it, nor has a traveler
Carried it in his loads; no, nor has a tree produced it*

From this, it becomes clear to us that the Sufi experience of the Emir, which he chose to traverse in a path that does not rely on instruction, teaching, and acquisition, nor is it accomplished through debate and disputation, but is the path of experiential verification, heart-based practice, and emotional refinement.

Conclusion

We conclude at the end of this research that Emir Abdelkader was one of the unique personalities that generations will remember throughout the ages. He is one of the radiant lamps that time rarely bestows. As we previously mentioned, Emir Abdelkader was not merely a man of politics and jihad, but also a man of thought, knowledge, and literature, known for his devotion to reading, memorization of Arab poetic heritage, and his great diligence in the pursuit of knowledge. This is what made him an author and a brilliant poet.

The follower of the Emir's poetic experience realizes that poetry accompanied the Emir throughout his life, settling with him wherever he settled. It was his companion and friend in days of joy and sorrow, and accompanied him when he became a prisoner in France, and in the land of exile and other regions where the Emir composed his beautiful poems. His life, in both its political-jihadi and intellectual-spiritual dimensions, is the best proof of the connection between theoretical faith and noble practical conduct at his hands. As the Emir demonstrated during the catastrophe of the Christians of Damascus,

he was truly a man of difficult stances, proving the humanistic aspect and the quality of religious tolerance that distinguished his personality, and demonstrating the depth of his Sufi experience. He is an exemplary model of the dialogue of civilizations and religions. We also conclude with a final thought: the archives and works written about Emir Abdelkader constitute a historical, scientific, and intellectual treasure from which we can draw information about important stages of Algeria's political and cultural history.

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