

‘ABD AL-WAHHĀB AL-SHA‘RĀNĪ’S *LAṬĀ’IF* AL-MINAN AND THE VIRTUE OF SINCERE IMMODESTY

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Introduction

The essay below analyzes the substance and rhetoric of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī’s (d. 973/1565) book *Laṭā’if al-minan wa-l-akhlāq* (Subtle Blessings and Morals). While giving particular attention to the text’s introduction and concluding sections, in my analysis here I use the *Laṭā’if* as a case study to illustrate how Sufi authors like al-Sha‘rānī attempted to relieve the tension between the antipodal Sufi virtues of, on the one hand, concealing one’s spiritual state to preserve the purity of one’s intention and, on the other, speaking openly about God’s blessings upon one as a demonstration of gratitude to God and a means to guide others along the Sufi Path.

‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī was an Egyptian Sufi and legal thinker who lived in Cairo during the final years of the Mamlūk Sultanate and the first half-century of Ottoman rule in Egypt. He is best remembered today for his writings in comparative Islamic law (*ikhtilāf al-madhāhib*), Sufi ethics, and Sufi hagiography. Several of his texts would generate controversy during his lifetime owing to what he claimed

were libelous passages that jealous peers had falsely attributed to him.¹ During his early years, al-Shaʿrānī studied Islamic law and other scholarly disciplines under Egypt's Chief Shāfiʿī Justice Zakariyyā al-Anṣārī (d. 926/1523); a charismatic and illiterate figure named ʿAlī al-Khawwāṣ (d. 939/1532–3) served as his primary guide in the study and practice of Sufism.² By the second half of his life, al-Shaʿrānī's acumen and reputation had earned him the attention of Egypt's Ottoman rulers, who gifted him with a Sufi hospice (*zāwiya*) that made him independently wealthy through the revenues that it generated.

Written in 960/1553, when al-Shaʿrānī was around sixty years old and nearing the last decade of his life, the *Laṭāʾif* remains difficult to categorize as a text within the conventional genres of Islamic scholarship, though it would be reasonable to classify it as autobiography, albeit autobiography written in a non-traditional form. About the *Laṭāʾif*, al-Shaʿrānī writes: "I do not know of anybody from the early or later generations who has preceded me in writing something like it."³ I would agree with the author's assessment, as my research to date has led me to no antecedent text in Arabic that resembles the *Laṭāʾif* in form or content.⁴ As an historical autobiography, the text paints a detailed portrait of the daily life of a scholar-Sufi in sixteenth-century Egypt and, for this reason alone, merits more scholarly attention than it has received to date.

As for its structure, the *Laṭāʾif* contains an extended introduction in which al-Shaʿrānī presents his justifications for writing his book along with a compelling argument for the book's merits. This introduction is then followed by sixteen chapters that correspond with sixteen categories of blessings that God has bestowed upon the author throughout the phases of his life. According to al-Shaʿrānī, the particular blessings that he cites and the length of each of his chapters were dependent upon the nature and length of the "in-rush" (*al-wārid*) that appeared to him at the time of writing.⁵ The *Laṭāʾif*'s conclusion records the indignities that al-Shaʿrānī suffered at the hands of his peers and is followed by an index written by the author to help those who wish to search his book for a specific virtue.

1. For an overview of al-Shaʿrānī's life and thought, see The [Oxford] *Encyclopedia of Islam and Law* (Oxford Islamic Studies Online), s.v. "Shaʿrānī, ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-" (by Matthew B. Ingalls), <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t349/e0012> (accessed February 2019); Michael Winter, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt: Studies in the Writings of ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Shaʿrānī* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1982). For al-Shaʿrānī's legal thought, see Ahmed Fekry Ibrahim, "al-Shaʿrānī's Response to Legal Purism: A Theory of Legal Pluralism," *Islamic Law and Society* 20, no. 1–2 (2013): 110–40; cf. Samuela Pagani, "The Meaning of *Ikhtilāf al-Madhāhib* in ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Shaʿrānī's *al-Mizān al-Kubrā*," *Islamic Law and Society* 11, no. 2 (2004): 177–212.

2. For al-Shaʿrānī's debt to al-Anṣārī in his legal training, see Muḥammad al-Malījī al-Shaʿrānī, *Manāqib al-quṭb al-rabbānī sayyidi ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Shaʿrānī* (Cairo: Dār al-Jūdiyya, 2005), 62–3. For his primary shaykhs in Sufism, see *ibid.*, 63–76; Winter, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt*, 56–8, and *passim*.

3. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Shaʿrānī, *Laṭāʾif al-minan wa-l-akhlāq fī wujūb al-tahadduth bi-niʿmat Allāh ʿalā l-ṭlāq* (Subtle Blessings and Morals: On the Necessity of Speaking Unrestrictedly about God's Grace), ed. Aḥmad ʿIzzū ʿInāya (Damascus: Dār al-Taḥqāwā, 2004), 835. Elsewhere the author says that he wrote an abridgement of the text (*al-Minan al-ṣughhrā*) and a version of intermediary length (*al-Minan al-wustā*). The latter has been published, although with a confusing twist in that the composition date mentioned in its colophon falls exactly one year before that found in the published edition of the *Laṭāʾif*. See *idem*, *al-Minan al-wustā*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd al-Mizyādī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2010), 28, 99, 443. Al-Shaʿrānī's *Laṭāʾif al-minan* should also not be confused with the book bearing a similar title written by Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh al-Sakandari (d. 709/1309).

4. Cf. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī's *al-Tahadduth bi-niʿmat Allāh*, which functions more like a traditional autobiography. E. M. Sartain, *Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī*, 2 vols. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), vol. 2 (=Arabic text of *al-Tahadduth bi-niʿmat Allāh*). Al-Shaʿrānī was familiar with al-Suyūṭī's autobiography and mentions reading a holograph copy of it. Al-Shaʿrānī, *Laṭāʾif al-minan*, 61.

5. *Ibid.*, 16.

As al-Sha‘rānī explains in his introduction, many of his students and disciples believe that the Sufi virtues listed in the *Laṭā’if* are nonexistent in their particular age, and thus they see themselves as living without a human exemplar who might provide a practical illustration of how to apply what they have studied in theory.⁶ This introduction was written at a later stage, after al-Sha‘rānī had arranged the book’s main chapters and shown a draft of them to an unnamed scholar who objected that the virtues enumerated within reflected the qualities of the prophets and not those of everyday people. Al-Sha‘rānī mentions this comment multiple times throughout the *Laṭā’if*, while he excuses the scholar who said it on the grounds that the latter’s rudimentary spiritual standing did not permit him to realize that these were merely the character traits of the very beginners on the path.⁷

The Fundamental Tension at the Heart of the *Laṭā’if*

The contents of the *Laṭā’if*’s first chapter provide a fair representation of the tone and substance of the book’s remaining fifteen chapters; they also reveal a fundamental tension within the text which the author recognizes from the outset. Detailing those virtues and blessings that God bestowed upon al-Sha‘rānī during his youth and early studies, the first half of the chapter lists the following as examples:

The author’s genealogical descent from Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥanafīyya (d. 81/700); his memorizing the Quran at a young age; his having never neglected the five prayers since the age of eight; that he was protected from harm notwithstanding his vulnerability as an orphan; the time in which a crocodile saved him from drowning in the Nile; his migration to Cairo from the countryside for the sake of his studies; his memorization of more base texts (*mutūn*) than any of his peers; his commenting upon these texts under the greatest scholars of his day; his reading of many texts—more than any of his peers—under the guidance of these same scholars; his adopting the most cautious position in law whenever possible; that he was never a *madhhab* chauvinist in that he followed his school according to the legal proofs that were most persuasive while continuing to believe that all other Muslims of other *madhhab* affiliations were still upon righteous guidance; the degree to which he interpreted the words of the Sufis in the most generous light and defended them from their detractors, etc.⁸

A reader of this content could be excused for viewing it as a pretense for boasting. In fact, such a reading is supported by the author’s concern for his posthumous legacy, revealed throughout his *Laṭā’if*, which he composed towards the end of his life when he found himself surrounded by many jealous peers who had plotted against him in the past whenever the opportunity presented itself.

6. Ibid., 11.

7. Ibid., 46–7, and passim.

8. Ibid., 16–17, 66–79.

In reality, the *Laṭāʾif* demonstrates self-awareness of the tension between the Sufi imperative to conceal one's own spiritual state and the imperative to speak openly about God's blessings upon one. In fact, the tone and structure of al-Shaʿrānī's introduction reveal an author who is conflicted and wary of the controversy that his book was likely to generate. Towards the end of the *Laṭāʾif*'s introduction, for example, al-Shaʿrānī writes, "By God! And again by God! I did not intend to brag before my brothers by relating my virtues and pious feats in this book."⁹ The author's tone here and elsewhere clearly anticipates readers who will interpret his words in a cynical light that paints his book as an extended boast. Throughout the *Laṭāʾif*, al-Shaʿrānī appears to be addressing his students, his critics, and himself all at the same time as he alternates between his justifications for speaking openly about his good deeds and morals and his discussions of the perils of ostentation and conceit.

The remainder of the study below analyzes the theory and rhetoric that al-Shaʿrānī employs to relieve the fundamental tension that emerges in the *Laṭāʾif* from his attempts to balance between the competing Sufi virtues of concealing God's blessings and speaking openly of them. Does al-Shaʿrānī's self-awareness of this tension help or impede us when we seek to draw lessons from the book today? Moreover, how do al-Shaʿrānī's pedagogical impulses figure into his theory and rhetoric? To answer questions like these, my analysis focuses particularly on the author's introduction, which covers the first sixty-five pages of the published edition of the *Laṭāʾif*, and on his conclusion, in which he is most explicit about his motives for writing his book, his anxieties about his potential readership, and the methods that he used to weigh the relative merits of concealing God's blessings versus the merits of sharing them with the public. Throughout this analysis, my goal has been to get inside al-Shaʿrānī's mind to the best of my abilities without succumbing to the easy temptation of reading his words through a cynical lens, as he anticipated that many of his readers would do.

Al-Shaʿrānī's Motives and Intended Audience

In order to dissect al-Shaʿrānī's arguments for speaking unrestrictedly about God's blessings upon him and to assess the sincerity behind these arguments, it is first necessary to understand the author's motives for writing his book and to identify his anticipated readership, which includes both his sympathizers and his detractors. Al-Shaʿrānī's motives and the audience that he envisioned can be gathered from his direct statements about these matters and extracted in their subtler forms from the author's rhetoric and tone.

In his introduction, al-Shaʿrānī lists five motives for writing his *Laṭāʾif*. The first and most important of these is that his students and disciples—whom he refers to as his "brothers"—might view him as a practical illustration of how to embody

9. Ibid., 65.

the lofty virtues that he has taught them, as these students mistakenly believed that such virtues had long been abandoned in their day and age. Because God graced al-Sha‘rānī with these virtues that he had previously lacked, the author felt an obligation to guide others to them out of gratitude to God, “just as the person whom God has saved from drowning feels an imperative to save everyone he sees drowning.”¹⁰ As a separate but related motive, al-Sha‘rānī explains that he wrote the *Laṭā’if* to demonstrate his knowledge and piety to his scholarly peers so that they too might take him as an exemplar. Moreover, he chose to record his virtues in writing as a means of expressing constant and eternal gratitude to God, as a book endures through time and thereby gives its author a type of immortality. By recording his virtues in the *Laṭā’if*, he similarly spares his peers the need to inquire about them later and reduces the likelihood of embellishment or garbled retelling in the future. Finally, al-Sha‘rānī explains that he has been motivated to emulate the practice of the righteous Muslim progenitors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) who would mention their good deeds and virtues to those around them in order to proclaim the blessings that God had bestowed upon them. He mentions the names of many famous Muslim scholars and saints who preceded him in this regard.¹¹

An additional motive appears elsewhere in al-Sha‘rānī’s introduction. As he explains it, “Everything I have mentioned in this book is like the weapon of obliteration to the pretenders and light-minded ones. Were they to possess it, they would incinerate it because it reveals to them and to everyone their ignorance of the Path that they claim to adhere to . . .”¹² What becomes clear from these words and from similar sentiments in the author’s introduction is that al-Sha‘rānī believed that some or all of his unnamed rivals were false Sufis whose actions fell far short of the standards that he was setting for his disciples. The contents of his book are thus intended to give lie to such false Sufis, who the author seemed to expect would read his *Laṭā’if* or, at least, would hear about it.¹³

Beyond these explicit motives, we can extract two unstated motives from al-Sha‘rānī’s text without resorting to speculation. The first of these appears in the apologetics of the *Laṭā’if*, which, though infrequent, suggest that al-Sha‘rānī intended to use his book to persuade some members of his society of the legitimacy of Sufism and to demonstrate how it is inextricably linked to the Sharī‘a.¹⁴ A second unstated motive stems from al-Sha‘rānī’s reflections on his own mortality and his concerns for his posthumous legacy. In this light, he intended his *Laṭā’if* to serve as a record of his life, realizing that he would not be around for long to set that record straight. At one point in the *Laṭā’if*, for example, al-Sha‘rānī mentions a traumatic event that he had never before mentioned to his friends and he explains that “because I am in my final years when the time for training the *nafs* has reached its end,” it would now be reasonable to tell others about it.¹⁵

10. Ibid., 11.

11. Ibid., 11–13.

12. Ibid., 46. See also 47, 64–5.

13. On al-Sha‘rānī’s rivals among the Sufis of his time, see Winter, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt*, 83–8 and passim.

14. Al-Sha‘rānī, *Laṭā’if al-minan*, 52–3.

15. Ibid., 834.

From the abovementioned motives, we can glimpse the audience that al-Shaʿrānī anticipated as he wrote his *Laṭāʾif*. Of course, his students and disciples would form his primary audience, as he explains in his introductory words, and it is his sense of responsibility to them that accounts for most of the *Laṭāʾif*'s structure and content. Similarly, al-Shaʿrānī expected his book to be read by sympathetic peers—that is, by those who looked to the author as an equal and friend but who might not have possessed as full a picture of his spiritual standing as would accord with his own self-perception. Though infrequent, the apologetic passages of the *Laṭāʾif* also suggest that al-Shaʿrānī expected his book to be read by some critics of Sufism—those who would presumably bear no ill-will towards the author himself and would thus remain receptive to his arguments in defense of a Sharīʿa-bound Sufism. Al-Shaʿrānī's concerns for his posthumous reception, moreover, reveal that he expected many generations of future readers to pour over the pages of his *Laṭāʾif*. Finally, as is mentioned above and is further seen in the uneasy tone that characterizes the text, al-Shaʿrānī anticipated that his enemies, including those who had already slandered him, would read his *Laṭāʾif* and project the worst of intentions onto its author. How then would al-Shaʿrānī respond, especially to this latter category of readers? The next section analyzes al-Shaʿrānī's defense of speaking openly of his virtues, good deeds, and blessings as he might have presented it to the most hostile members of his readership.

Al-Shaʿrānī's Justification for Speaking Openly of His Virtues and Morals

Al-Shaʿrānī justifies his choice to disclose his virtues to his readership on the basis of four parallel arguments: an argument from authority, a scriptural argument, a rational argument, and a legal argument.

In presenting his argument from authority, al-Shaʿrānī quotes over a dozen eminent Muslim scholars and Sufis from the first to the tenth Islamic centuries. Their quoted words either encourage others to speak openly of God's blessings upon them and to thank Him for these, or they are examples of these scholars and Sufis speaking of their own virtues in a manner that might be construed by the uninitiated as boasting.¹⁶ As an example of the former, the author quotes Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778), who said, "Whoever does not speak about a blessing exposes it to extinction."¹⁷ As an example of the latter, al-Shaʿrānī cites a story in which "a man pinched the foot of Abū l-ʿAbbās al-Sayyārī [(d. 342/953)], one of the men of al-Qushayrī's *Epistle*, to which Abū l-ʿAbbās said, 'Do you pinch a foot that has never once walked towards the disobedience of God?'"¹⁸ After citing these saintly authorities, the author explains:

16. For more on early Sufis' attitudes towards this theme, see Atif Khalil's discussion of the "gratitude of the tongue" in "The Embodiment of Gratitude (*Shukr*) in Sufi Ethics," *Studia Islamica* 111 (2016): 164–7, esp. 166.

17. Al-Shaʿrānī, *Laṭāʾif al-minan*, 60.

18. *Ibid.*, 61.

This is some of what has been transmitted of the speech of the righteous Muslim progenitors, making it known that the scholars and righteous do not praise themselves for the sake of boasting or eye-service. Far be that from them! Rather, they have based their behavior in sound principles and lawful objectives. Now that you have read these evidences and reports that we have mentioned above, my brother, don’t you dare rush to censure one of the ‘*ārifūn* (experiential knowers of God) when he praises himself by your interpreting this as a function of egotistical objectives. It is incumbent upon you to interpret such people in the most generous manner. God, the Exalted, has praised those who hear a statement and follow the best of it—These are the people whom God has guided; these are the people of insight.¹⁹

Of course, the strength of the author’s argument rests upon his definition of the “‘*ārifūn*,” a category of people who would appear to include all the figures whom he cites within his argument from authority. More is said about the ‘*ārifūn* below, as they form an integral ingredient in al-Sha‘rānī’s epistemology and in his broader justifications for writing his *Laṭā’if*. For now, it is noteworthy that the author’s words here anticipate readers who might still interpret the words of the early Muslim saints as emanating from a place of ego.

As for his scriptural argument, al-Sha‘rānī cites for his readers six verses of the Quran in which the angels along with the prophets Joseph, David, Solomon, and Jesus mention their own virtues and the blessings that God has bestowed upon them. The Prophet Joseph, for example, said to the king of Egypt, “*Appoint me over the granaries of the land. I am an attentive guardian and knowledgeable.*”²⁰

The author’s use of hadith texts within his scriptural argument is slightly more sophisticated. Among the hadiths that he cites are the words of the Prophet: “I am the leader of the children of Adam on the Day of Judgment, and this is no boast.” According to al-Sha‘rānī, the Prophet added “and this is no boast” to clarify that his exalted status is not a function of his own power but rather is a function of his servitude to God.²¹ Moreover, taking hadiths like this as examples of the Prophet’s speaking openly of God’s favor upon him, al-Sha‘rānī explains:

In summary, God, the Exalted, has ordered us to emulate the Prophet of God—God’s blessings and peace be upon him—in every matter that was not made particular to him. Part of emulating him is that we speak of every blessing that God has bestowed upon us and not conceal it. We do not speak secretly about it but rather announce it for everyone to see. In this light, speaking openly of one’s virtues becomes an act that accords with the Sunna of the Prophet and is thus the correct application of the words of the Quran, *And as for the blessing of your Lord, speak.*²²

19. Ibid., 62. The words translated in italics are taken from Q 39:18.

20. Ibid., 58. The quote is taken from Q 12:55. Al-Sha‘rānī mistakenly writes that Joseph was addressing ‘Azīz and not the king.

21. Ibid. For this exact version of the hadith, see Muḥammad b. ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī, kitāb al-manāqib* (#3975).

22. Al-Sha‘rānī, *Laṭā’if al-minan*, 59. Q 93:11.

As for al-Shaʿrānī's rational argument for speaking openly of his virtues, the author provides three examples of inductive reasoning to convince the reader that his intention must be sound. First, al-Shaʿrānī explains that it was his thinking good of God (*ḥusn al-ẓann*) and his belief in God's unbounded magnanimity that ultimately freed him to recount his virtues to his readers. If his true motive were status or legacy, and not the fulfillment of God's command, then his virtues would all be rendered invalid owing to his insincerity, and God would have effectively stripped him of them. He believes that this would not reflect the true nature of God's boundless benevolence. Second, al-Shaʿrānī explains that God does not strip a person of true experiential knowledge (*al-maʿārif*), but rather strips a person of spiritual states (*aḥwāl*) owing to their ephemeral nature. Everything that he has mentioned in his *Laṭāʾif* are virtues based in experiential knowledge and not passing states, and are thus enduring, whether one speaks of them or not. Finally, al-Shaʿrānī writes:

Had the friends of God, the Exalted, not known—by virtue of God's magnanimity and bounty—that He would never strip them of the experiential knowledge and the virtues that He had bestowed upon them, they would never have put them in a book nor mentioned them in their gatherings. For, if the opposite were the case, then their actions and words would belie their claims.

In other words, that the friends of God spoke of their virtues orally and in writing implies that they knew with certainty that God would not strip them of their virtues and experiential knowledge of Him. Had the case been otherwise, then they never possessed true experiential knowledge of God in the first place and were never His saintly elect.²³

Finally, though he does not dwell on it, al-Shaʿrānī includes a passing legal argument to justify the contents of his *Laṭāʾif*. The author explains that he has chosen to begin each of his chapters with the phrase, “And among the things that God has blessed me with is . . .,” to demonstrate that he does not intend to boast when he lists the virtues that follow. Rather:

My intention with this is merely to declare principally my degree of gratitude to God, glorified and exalted. If this should require that I praise myself, then this is not what is intended in principle. It is merely by necessity. According to the dominant position of the scholars of jurisprudence, what is made necessary by the *madhhab* is not itself part of the dictates of the *madhhab*. Supporting this is the position of our scholars that if a person in a state of major ritual impurity were to recite the Quran without intending thereby to recite the Quran, this would be permissible. They say this is so because the Quran is not the Quran except through intention. Thus, the intent behind my words, ‘And among the things that God has blessed me with . . .,’ for example, is the declaration that this thing is from the bounty of God, glorified and exalted, not through my power or strength nor because I deserve any of it.²⁴

23. *Ibid.*, 13.

24. *Ibid.*, 15.

Within the legal analogy at the heart of this passage at least, al-Sha‘rānī would appear to acknowledge that he has engaged in acts of self-praise within his *Laṭā‘if* and he does not simply shift the blame onto his reader for misunderstanding him. However, it is his true goal of praising God that renders his acts of self-praise necessary and therefore permissible, if not obligatory.

Nevertheless, the author does not cite his four arguments as an absolute justification for speaking openly about one’s virtues. Rather, people who manifest their good deeds do so within one of three contexts, and these contexts determine whether they are justified or not. The first context occurs when some members of the general populace, particularly those without a shaykh to guide them, manifest their deeds for the sake of ostentation and reputation.²⁵ This, of course, is unjustified. A second context occurs whenever a person senses that his actions have been done solely for the sake of God, but he is not well established in his spiritual station (*maqām*) and thus frets about making his actions manifest to others. According to al-Sha‘rānī, this person is also unjustified in making his actions known to others and should not do so. A third context occurs whenever a person is “firmly established in the realities of *tawḥīd*” and has no fear of making his actions manifest “as he witnesses his actions as belonging to God to the same extent that he witnesses his essence as a creation belonging to God.” Such a person remains “unable to attribute to himself any of his actions” as they all belong to God with the exception of some degree of moral accountability; he sees himself as “the empty vessel that the Mover moves within emptiness.” For those who have reached this spiritual station, it is obligatory that they manifest all of their actions and virtues while acknowledging them as blessings from God, for “all actions that the person sees as a means of thanking God are also part of God’s blessings upon that person.”²⁶

Akhlāq al-Muridīn vs. Akhlāq al-‘Ārifīn

As the previous paragraph demonstrates, a person’s spiritual station determines whether the imperative is for him to reveal or conceal his virtues. Within this relative framework, al-Sha‘rānī must necessarily place himself within the third context of those “firmly established in the realities of *tawḥīd*,” or the contents of his *Laṭā‘if* would be illegitimate according to his own standards.

Elsewhere in his introduction, al-Sha‘rānī describes the ‘*ārif* in similar terms. It is the unwavering stability of the ‘*ārif*’s spiritual station that distinguishes him from the *murīds* (aspirants), who, by definition, are not well established in their spiritual stations and thus correspond with the second context mentioned above. Moreover, upon reaching a higher *maqām*, the ‘*ārif* recognizes that his previous station was merely that of the *murīds*.²⁷ The ‘*ārif* thus reaches his lofty and stable

25. Ibid., 62.

26. Ibid., 63.

27. Ibid., 46–7.

maqām with a concomitant certainty that he is, in fact, an *‘ārīf*. If we put this theory in conversation with the three contexts outlined above, then al-Sha‘rānī clearly considered himself an *‘ārīf* who was free—if not obligated—to speak openly of his virtues.

That said, the author repeats over and over in his introduction that the virtues he listed in his *Laṭā‘if* are merely those of the *murīds* (*akhlāq al-murīdīn*)—i.e., virtues that he exhibited at an earlier phase in his life but that he has now transcended. Any mention of the virtues of the *‘ārīfs* (*akhlāq al-‘ārīfīn*) that he might have inadvertently included in his *Laṭā‘if* are “mere slips of the pen.”²⁸

An example from the text helps to illustrate how these distinctions can yield wildly different behaviors from the Sufis depending upon which side of the *‘ārīf-murīd* divide they fall. Al-Sha‘rānī explains that *murīds* are instructed to abandon all worldly things that distract them from God. However, once these Sufis attain the unshakeable station of *ma‘rifa*, they are free to re-embrace worldly possessions and manifest other behaviors that were previously forbidden to them, such as vying with others for positions of leadership, bickering with others and keeping aloof from them, taking others to task for their abuses, and not forgiving others unless God so wills it. The outward behavior of the *‘ārīf* might thus resemble that of worldly-minded people, though his intention is completely different from theirs. In fact, al-Sha‘rānī holds that this new behavior is not merely permissible for the *‘ārīf* but rather is the best means of perfecting his state. Were he to oppose it, he would risk regressing to a lower spiritual station. The *‘ārīf*’s reason, for example, in vying with others for positions of leadership is not because he is enamored with himself, but rather it is with the intention to embody one of God’s own character traits, to maintain justice, fulfill the rights of all, and make his words more influential in society.²⁹

Al-Sha‘rānī’s theory here helps him to explain why his students believed that the Sufis of their day had failed to live up to the lofty virtues found in the hagiographies of earlier Sufis. Al-Sha‘rānī replies, in effect, that not only *did* he live up to these virtues towards the beginning of his Sufi training, but he had since transcended them for the very sake of his spiritual advancement. Moreover, the author identifies a methodological problem among many Sufi writers who record the words and deeds of the saints: they are usually oblivious as to whether these words and deeds come from the beginning, middle, or terminal phase of a saint’s spiritual path. Because these writers rarely taste for themselves anything close to what the saint has experienced, they remain ignorant of this subtle point and record everything that they hear about a saint. Thus, a saint might report on a matter and *then* enter into a state of erasure such that his perspective on the matter could change completely. Unless he is asked about the matter again, the reader will be left with a less mature mystical perspective that they ascribe to the saint in an unequivocal manner. It is for this reason that al-Sha‘rānī advocates

28. Ibid., 15, 46 and passim.

29. Ibid., 49.

for Sufi biographers to limit their stories to those that occurred at the terminal phase of a saint’s journey. According to his own assessment, al-Sha‘rānī claims to have employed this method when he wrote his famous *Ṭabaqāt* hagiographical dictionary.³⁰

As the analysis above has shown in various places, al-Sha‘rānī’s *Laṭā’if* reveals an author who is fully aware that many of his readers will misinterpret his text as an extended boast, while in many places his tone betrays a clear anxiety over his decision to write it. His introduction devotes ample space to discussions of his intentions and to his theories on the permissibility of speaking openly of one’s virtues and good deeds, all of which lay bare an author who is struggling to assuage some degree of cognitive dissonance.

One explanation for this cognitive dissonance is that perhaps the author remains confident in his spiritual station, but not in how it will be perceived by others. But why should he care about the latter? Al-Sha‘rānī’s genial personality does come across readily to those who are familiar with his writings, so it stands to reason that an agreeable person like him would, in fact, care about others’ opinions of him, as all of us do to one degree or another, regardless of what we tell ourselves.

That said, the alarm bells of cynicism do sound in my mind when I read passages in support of the *‘ārīf*’s vying with others for positions of power and similar things, as these mundane matters appear so easy to justify in light of al-Sha‘rānī’s spiritually relativistic method. This is not to suggest that my cynical impulses are correct or warranted, but they do point to some larger questions that we historians—and readers, in general—might consider when approaching unique texts like the *Laṭā’if*.

What is the correct balance to strike between a cynical and a generous reading of a text like the *Laṭā’if*? Should we—or even *can* we—leave our personal experiences and baggage at the door when approaching a text like this in order to avoid projecting our fears and misanthropy onto an author who deserves to be taken on his own merits? Does al-Sha‘rānī’s self-awareness of the tension at the heart of his *Laṭā’if* entitle him to a more charitable reading, as it is difficult to question the intentions of an author who devotes so much space to a discussion of his very intentions? As al-Sha‘rānī was a human being full of inconsistencies, like the rest of us, how do we grapple with the possibility that the author’s motives and intentions may have differed at various stages of his writing process? Finally, are we contemporary historians and readers fundamentally the same as any reader from any point in earlier history? Or, does the cultural and historical gap between us and al-Sha‘rānī make us especially ill-suited to give the author’s true intentions a fair assessment?

30. Ibid., 47.

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