

About Imam al-Dardīr:

Aḥmad bin Muḥammad bin Aḥmad bin Abū Ḥāmid al-‘Adawī al-Dardīr was born in 1127/1715 in the Upper Egyptian village of Banī ‘Adiyy, on the outskirts of present day Asyut. The village of Banī ‘Adiyy was named after the tribe that first settled there, originally from the Arabian Peninsula and descendants of the second caliph of Islam, ‘Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 22/644). This particular tribe was renowned for its proclivity in producing Islamic scholars and theologians. These include al-Dardīr’s master in jurisprudence, ‘Ali al-Ṣa’idī as well as many of his students and those he presided over as administrator of the Azhar dormitory for Upper Egyptian students. Several of the scholars hailing from this village later became renowned for their willingness to intercede on the behalf of the Cairo townspeople in addressing their grievances with the ruling elite. Al-Ṣa’idī in particular confronted several of the Mamluke emirs and it is said that when he approached they would extinguish their water pipes, as he detested smoking and would not fail to rebuke those who partook in it, even in a public forum. Al-Dardīr was clearly influenced by the likes of al-Ṣa’idī in this regard, as he too on more than one occasion confronted the emirs in order to obtain concessions for the hapless townspeople, particularly the residents of the impoverished Husaynayya quarter, just north of al-Azhar.

Al-Dardīr was taught the elementary aspects of reading and writing, in addition to memorising the Qur’ān under the tutelage of his father. Al-Dardīr’s father, Muḥammad, a local Qur’ān teacher, was held in high esteem and considered saintly as al-Dardīr ascribes to him several saintly miracles. Al-Dardīr relates that his father never accepted remuneration for his teaching duties, and that he would on occasion provide for his poorer students. He also relates that his mother would find light from what appeared to be lighted candles emanating from his father’s room at night when darkness had set in. When queried about it, he would reply that it is from the light of offering prayers upon the Prophet. Lastly, al-Dardīr recounts that in times of austerity when little food was available, his father would recite the Quran’ic chapter of *Quraysh* and subsequently the plate would feed a great number of people. Later on, al-Dardīr would recite the same chapter and would open locked doors without a key until he became renowned for such exploits.

After completing his primary education in Banī Adiyy, al-Dardīr travelled to Cairo to study at the prestigious al-Azhar. Little is recorded about this period in his life, but it can be assumed that he studied the Islamic canon of the day, which included the Arabic disciplines and the core disciplines of theology, jurisprudence, and *taṣawwuf*. It was during this time that al-Dardīr embarked on his most formative relationships, namely with his two main teachers, Muḥammad al-Ḥifnī and ‘Alī al-Ṣa’idī. Al-Ḥifnī served as Al-Dardīr’s main teacher in ḥadīth, as his scholarly *ijāza* indicates as much. Al-Ḥifnī also became al-Dardīr’s spiritual guide, by whom which he was initiated into the Khalwatī order. Al-Ṣa’idī was the foremost Maliki jurist of his generation, and al-Dardīr was his greatest pupil. Both al-Ḥifnī and al-Ṣa’idī were renowned for their influence over the Mamluke emirs, and their lack of hesitation in even rebuking them if the situation so warranted. Al-Jabartī mentions that he was especially critical of smoking of the water pipe and would publicly rebuke an emir if he saw it in his possession.

After ‘Alī al-Ṣa’īdī died in 1189/1775, al-Dardīr assumed his two official positions within al-Azhar, namely the position of mufti of the Maliki school, and rector of the Upper Egypt riwāq (residence hall/college). In addition, he continued to teach the disciplines of jurisprudence, theology, ḥadīth, tafsīr, and Arabic grammar and rhetoric in the Azhar mosque. Though he was not appointed the position of “Shaykh al-Azhar”, al-Jabartī concedes that al-Dardīr was seen as the “Shaykh of all of Egypt”; the Shaykh al-Azhar position was for several generations firmly in the grip of the Shāfi’īs, thus explaining the reason for overlooking al-Dardīr and al-Ṣa’īdī. Another plausible explanation is that scholars hailing from Upper Egypt may not have been viewed as loyal enough to the Ottoman Pasha and Mamluke emirs to be accorded the powerful position. Whatever the case may be, there is no doubt that Cairo denizens viewed al-Dardīr as the main religious authority after the deaths of al-Ṣa’īdī and al-Ḥifnī.

Al-Dardīr was the greatest disciple of al-Ḥifnī in the Khalwati order, who in turn was the greatest disciple of the Syrian shaykh who introduced the Syrian branch of the Khalwati order in Egypt, Muṣṭafa al-Bakrī. This underscores the importance of al-Dardīr in 18th century Sufism, in his role as a renewer within the order, as well as his role in the propagation of the order.¹ Al-Dardīr eventually established his own sub-order and *zāwiya*, though after his death his sub-order, the *Dardirayya-Khalwatiyya* was absorbed into the *Sibā’ayya* sub-order, named after his student and disciple, Ṣaliḥ al-Sibā’ī (d.). The *zāwiya* itself was built using funds provided by the sultan of Morocco, Muḥammad. Al-Jabartī recounts a story where the son of the sultan was in Egypt and had exhausted all of his funds, leaving him destitute in a foreign land. As Sultan Muḥammad was in the habit of patronising several of the Cairene ‘ulamā’, they were asked to surrender some of their tributes to support his young son. They all refused save for al-Dardīr, who reasoned that it was the sultan’s money to begin with, and as such, his son is more entitled to its use. When word reached the sultan of al-Dardīr’s magnanimity, the sultan increased his patronage the following year ten-fold. This allowed al-Dardīr to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and build the *zāwiya*. Al-Jabartī uses this story to demonstrate al-Dardīr’s integrity and his standing amongst all aspects of society, including the ruling elite, the scholarly elite, and the common people. Al-Dardīr died in 1786, the same year that the Ottoman sultan sent his top admiral to restore Ottoman suzerainty in the light of local Mamluke usurpation. His funeral prayer was held at the Azhar mosque where a large crowd attended. His body was then interred just a few hundred metres away the *zāwiya* he had established a few years earlier, where he remains until the current day.

Al-Dardīr wrote several works on theology, the most famous of which is his seventy line poem *al-Kharīda al-Bahiyya*. As he was renowned for his concern for the plight of the everyday man, many of his works focused on the edification of those who were otherwise too occupied to be true seekers of knowledge. Amongst these works, is his *al-Aqīda al-Tawḥidayya* (The Creed of Oneness), which is less than 250 words. Despite its brevity, it addresses all of the fundamental beliefs about the reality of the universe that Muslims should hold to be true. In a time when modernity’s insistence on dismissing any reality that cannot be empirically verified - an idea that even many Enlightenment thinkers

rejected - and in its wake has left billions of people feeling disillusioned and alienated from their inner selves. With such a daunting situation prevailing, it has never been a more appropriate time to study, internalise, and live the words of the Muhammadan inheritors.