

BIOGRAPHY

The biography of any Islamic scholar is at once inclusive and reflective of the biographies of their teachers. The transfer of Islamic knowledge from teacher to student is meant to engender an experiential *tawhīd* (Divine unicity) that reforms and transforms the student's character and etiquette (*akhlāq*). In other words, the teacher is the means to illuminate the student's heart (*qalb*) – its faculties of perception, emotion and will – and, consequently, his conduct with Allāh and His creation.

Spiritual mentorship or *ṣuḥbah* is the ideal Islamic pedagogy. The necessity of this mentorship, unfortunately almost alien to modern Muslim sensibilities, is a truth that has never, until post-colonial times, required debate or defense. It was an axiomatic truth that each Muslim knew intuitively. The evidence was nothing less than the miraculous transformation of untold numbers of Companions under the guiding hand and heart of our Master Muḥammad ﷺ.

The spiritual inheritance of the Scholar-Saint is a lineage of shared *ṣuḥbah*, link-by-link, to the illuminating reality of the Messenger ﷺ. In this spirit, it is only befitting that the biography of Shaykh Mokhtār Maghrāoui begins with his spiritual father and mentor, Shaykh Muḥammad Emin Er (may Allāh bless and sanctify his soul).

Shaykh Muḥammad Emin Er

Shaykh Muḥammad Emin Er¹ was born around the outbreak of World War I, possibly in 1914 and perhaps as early as 1909. The official records of the time are not always accurate, and the exact date of his birth is uncertain. He was born in the late Ottoman era in the village of Külüyan near the town of Çermik, Diyarbakır, in what is today southeastern Turkey.

When Shaykh Muḥammad Emin was a child of three or four, his mother passed away; at the age of ten, his father died, leaving him an orphan.

At the time, the Ottoman state extended from North Africa to Yemen, from the Balkans to the frontiers of Persia. But the coordinated attacks that it faced on multiple fronts led to the depletion of its dwindling financial resources. The economic situation became ruinous, resulting in severe material hardship throughout the country, not least in the impoverished regions of Eastern Anatolia where Shaykh Muḥammad Emin grew up.

Shaykh Muḥammad Emin spent his early life in straightened circumstances, first under the care of his stepmother, and later under the care of his elder brother. High up in the mountains surrounding his village, Shaykh Muḥammad Emin shepherded goats to help support his family.

Throughout these difficulties, Shaykh Muḥammad Emin's singular desire was to learn to read and write. Enjoying neither paper nor pen, he used stones to etch words and sentences on flat rocks while tending

¹ This is a re-worked biography, with some additions, of Shaykh Muḥammad Emin Er taken from his work entitled, *The Soul of Islam: Essential Doctrines and Beliefs*, translated by Joseph Walsh. Shifa Publishing, 2008. Pages 13-40.

goats on the mountainsides. He would shed bitter tears imploring Allāh to help him learn to read the Qur'ān.

He missed no opportunity to seek out those whom he thought could teach him. Shaykh Muḥammad Emin would journey on foot for days at a time to visit knowledgeable people in the vicinity of his village, however briefly. Eventually, he learned to write letters and read books in the Ottoman script. But there was no one at the time to introduce him to the Arabic language and traditional Islamic disciplines, and he sought what knowledge he could from books.

When World War I came to a close, the nascent Turkish Republic abolished the traditional Ottoman script and outlawed all Qur'ānic and Islamic education with harsh, and sometimes mortal, punishment. Families feared teaching the Qur'ān to their children even in the privacy of their own homes.

While the first awakenings of his spiritual quest came to him at a very young age, Shaykh Muḥammad Emin recalled that few opportunities to learn were available:

From my early childhood, I was anxious with respect to death and the life to come, so I would visit certain teachers and inquire with them about all this. I asked them how to prepare myself for the next life. From early childhood I was curious about such things. I kept asking older people why we are so interested in this life and the things of this world, when we are going to die, absolutely, every one of us. So, it became my main goal to seek out a teacher and gain a religious education.

But at that time everything was forbidden in Turkey. Even to read and to learn the Qur'ān was forbidden in those days. It was not easy, like it is today.

Shaykh Muḥammad Emin resolved to seek his religious learning in Syria but he was declined entry. When he returned at the age of twenty-five from his first Ḥajj, he undertook extensive travels in eastern Anatolia and later in Syria to seek out Islamic scholars.

In the years that followed, Shaykh Muḥammad Emin studied Arabic and the rational and Islamic sciences with a number of scholars. He studied morphology (*ṣarf*), syntax (*naḥw*), propositional logic (*manṭiq*), philology (*'ilm al-waḍ'*), figurative usage (*isti'ārah*), literary style (*adab*), lexicology (*ma'ānī*), rhetoric (*bayān*), refined usage (*badī'*), fundamentals of religious belief (*uṣūl al-dīn*), doctrinal philosophy (*kalām*), Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*), the science of Qur'ānic recitation (*tajwīd*), theoretical jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), the sciences of the prophetic traditions (*uṣūl al-ḥadīth*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the laws of inheritance (*farā'id*).

He spent considerable time with Molla Rasūl, a classmate of Shaykh Bediüzzaman Sa'īd Nursī. In 1951, Shaykh Muḥammad completed the last of his studies with Shaykh Muḥammad Ma'shūq who granted him an *ijāzah*, the traditional diploma and authorization to teach, in all of the rational sciences and traditional Islamic disciplines.

Concurrent with his studies in the Islamic sciences, Shaykh Muḥammad Emin devotedly pursued the study and practice of *taṣawwuf*, *tazkiyat al-naḥs*, or *iḥsān* – the normative discipline of spiritual purification, which is the essence of Islam. He had a number of spiritual teachers, all from the

Naqshbandī order. Following the death of Shaykh Aḥmad Ghaznawī, whom he met while he was in Syria, he became a student of Shaykh Muḥammad Sa‘īd Saydā al-Jazarī and remained under his tutelage until he was granted an *ijāzah* to guide students of his own.

Shaykh Muḥammad Emin was profoundly affected by Shaykh Sa‘īd’s character (*akhlāq*): his immense kindness and love for all, selfless service towards others, boundless patience, genuine humility, unaffected sincerity, innocent self-effacement, and his continuous forbearance and forgiveness.

Shaykh Muḥammad Emin related that he never heard Shaykh Sa‘īd utter a harsh or disparaging word against another, nor did he ever defend himself. When he heard of others slandering him, his only response would be: “*I have more faults than they know.*”

Once, when he was quite elderly, Shaykh Sa‘īd learned that fellow villagers were building a house but did not have enough stone to complete the construction. He went to a ruined house, asked his students to place two stones from it on his back, and carried them to the house being constructed.

Shaykh Sa‘īd rode on donkeys, never horses, due to a constant concern to preserve his humility and ward off any ostentation.

Ṣuḥbah with Shaykh Sa‘īd was instrumental in shaping Shaykh Muḥammad Emin’s scholarship, spirituality, character and pedagogy. Shaykh Muḥammad Emin would later affirm that every spiritual path has its own methods of remembrance (*dhikr*) and practice, but among all of them, the practice of *ṣuḥbah* is indispensable and uniquely effective.

Until the last breath of his life – and he lived to be over 100 years old – Shaykh Muḥammad Emin lived the character (*akhlāq*) that he inherited from his teacher: He was in a state of perpetual Divine remembrance (*dhikr*); lived a life of rigorous worship; fasted whenever possible; regularly observed the night vigil prayers (*tahajjud*); ate, spoke and slept little; counselled all those who sought his advice; magnanimously hosted a steady stream of guests in his modest Ankara apartment; travelled far and wide to join family and fraternal ties; tirelessly taught students, sensitive to each student’s needs and aptitude; and continued to write on a variety of subjects.

Those who had the Divinely-gifted grace to spend time with him attest that he did everything, and lived every moment, with an unmatched poetic, innocent, spiritual elegance. Shaykh Mokhtār testifies:

The most wonderful experience I had in the presence of Shaykh Muḥammad Emin was observing his character. He was beautiful in the way he spoke, ate, smiled, and walked. Everything he did was done with beauty. Allāh imbued him with elegant majesty and elegant beauty. I have never encountered anyone as spiritually and morally elegant as him. He was a living friend of Allāh.

The source of Shaykh Muḥammad Emin Er’s rare majesty and beauty came from his lifelong quest to emulate, to the fullest extent possible, the outer and inner character of Allah’s Beloved ﷺ. Dr. Recep Şentürk – one of Shaykh Muḥammad Emin’s closest and most beloved students, who himself received an *ijāzah* to guide seekers to Allāh – remembers Shaykh Muḥammad Emin’s parting advice to him on his death bed before he passed away:

The summative advice of my life is this: Let us be wise, follow the Messenger of Allah, our Master Muḥammad ﷺ, and enter the Paradise of our Lord. Let us not be foolish, disobey him ﷺ, squander this incomparable grace, and instead enter the Hellfire.

May Allāh sanctify the soul of Shaykh Muḥammad Emin Er and benefit us by him. Āmīn.

Shaykh Mokhtār Maghrāoui

Shaykh Mokhtār Maghrāoui was born in 1955, in the outskirts of what is now the current province of Ghriss, Algeria. He comes from the lineage of the children of the famous saintly scholar Shaykh Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar al-Huwārī, who traces his lineage to our Master Muḥammad ﷺ through his grandson, Ḥasan (May Allāh be pleased with him), through his grandson, Idrīs (May Allāh be pleased with him).

Shaykh Mokhtār’s childhood and youth were spent with his family and siblings in Algeria. The stories he recounts of his parents tell of their traditional Islamic character and piety. He remembers that his late father (may Allāh be pleased with him) could recite the entire Qur’ān from memory like others recite Sūrah al-Fātiḥah. His mother’s most fervent desire is to live and die in steadfast adherence (thabāt) to Allāh’s obedience. She constantly implores all to please remember her request in their supplication – may Allāh grant her the steadfastness (thabāt) she seeks. Āmīn.

An exemplary student, Shaykh Mokhtār was granted a scholarship to study in Germany and then the United States, where he obtained an MA in physics and a PhD in electrical Engineering from Syracuse University. As a graduate student and thereafter, he lectured at Union College, St. Rose College, and Syracuse University in the fields of engineering, math, physics and religion.

While reading about the sacred sciences during his undergraduate studies, he was profoundly affected by the consistence, coherence and clarity of Islamic legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). He began to immerse himself in the study of Islam and its rational sciences.

By Allāh’s grace, his intellectual discovery of Islam’s sacred sciences altered the course of his life. Shaykh Mokhtār implored Allāh to open for him the pathways of beneficial knowledge; and he devoted all his available time and energy to its pursuit. He read as widely and deeply as he could. Whenever possible, he sought the counsel and companionship of scholars in their fields.

The late ḥadīth scholar Shaykh Muṣṭafā al-A‘zamī (may Allāh be pleased with him) was one of his teachers at whose hands Shaykh Mokhtār delved deeply into the science and critique of prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*). Shaykh Muṣṭafā loved Shaykh Mokhtār as his son, valued and sought his scholarly opinion on his work, and bequeathed to Shaykh Mokhtār his library.

Shaykh Mokhtār first met Shaykh Muḥammad Emin Er on one of Shaykh Muḥammad Emin’s many journeys to the United States to visit his students. As time passed and their encounters became more frequent, Shaykh Mokhtār gained deeper insights into Shaykh Muḥammad Emin’s character and etiquette (*akhlāq*). His heart began to witness more and more of Shaykh Muḥammad Emin’s rare

beauty, and he acquired an indescribable love and reverence for him that, to this very day, he finds emotionally and spiritually overwhelming.

“*He was Allāh’s gift to me,*” Shaykh Mokhtār once stated.

The *ṣuḥbah* between them continued for many years. Those who knew Shaykh Muḥammad Emin and attended his gatherings narrate that Shaykh Muḥammad Emin had an intense love for Shaykh Mokhtār. A scholar who was present relates: “*Shaykh Muḥammad Emin would seek Shaykh Mokhtār with ardour and longing, like a mother for her child.*”

In the sacred sanctuary of Makkah during Ḥajj in 2006, Shaykh Muḥammad Emin granted Shaykh Mokhtār an *ijāzah* (a traditional diploma and authorization to teach) in *taṣawwuf* and licenced him with spiritual authority to guide seekers to Allāh. In 2010, Shaykh Muḥammad Emin conferred upon him an *ijāzah* of sacred knowledge.

On one occasion, Shaykh Muḥammad Emin said: “*Mokhtār is God-conscious, a scholar (‘ālim).*” When North American students would approach Shaykh Muḥammad Emin to entreat him to take them as his students, he would answer: “*Why are you coming to me? You have Mokhtār with you.*”

Shaykh Mokhtār has taught and offered spiritual guidance in the United States for decades. He was the Imām and Scholar-in-Residence in Albany and Troy, New York; Boca Raton, Florida; and Plano, Texas. For many years, he served as a member of the Fiqh Council of North America. Muslims across the United States and Canada have experienced and benefited from his retreats, seminars and lectures.

The distinctiveness of Shaykh Mokhtār’s teaching and spiritual guidance lies in its unity of purpose. Every field of knowledge – whether theoretical, legal, historical, exegetical or spiritual – must serve the twin, inseparable constants of our faith: experiential (and not merely intellectual or academic) *tawḥīd* (Divine unicity); and beautiful, refined character (*akhlāq*). This is the Prophetic legacy.

The essential means to realizing these twin constants is through the purification of our lower selves, or *tazkiyat al-nafs*. The heart is the seat of our normative and rational perception, emotional experience and will. Its purification – and only its purification – will ensure correct thought, feeling, will and consequently, conduct. Without learning to live every aspect of our lives within an envelope of inner purification, our individual and collective reform will flounder and be futile. Only in reclaiming this lost legacy will Islam’s exoteric and esoteric, material and spiritual, rational and supra-rational, praxis and practice be reconciled, harmonized and unified. *Islām, Imān* and *Iḥsān*. This is the Prophetic pedagogy.

Since 2009, Shaykh Mokhtār has been the Senior Scholar at *Al-Madina Institute* (almadina.org) and is currently the teacher and spiritual mentor of the ongoing *Ṣuḥba Program* that the Institute runs in Istanbul, Turkey. Under his guidance, students and their families in the *Ṣuḥba Program* undergo a year-long, intensive study along with spiritual practice. Participants study four foundational subjects that provide the unified intellectual and spiritual bedrock of their path to seeking Divine nearness; and they couple their studies with spiritual practice and character refinement through spiritual mentorship in a real-life environment.

And to Allāh belongs all success.