

Shaykh Shoayb Ahmad: *Muslim Scholars of the 20th Century: A Concise History*

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A tremendous effort by University of Madina-trained South African founder of Ma'had al-Nur al-Islami madrasa Shaykh Shoayb Ahmad, the hefty single-spaced *Muslim Scholars of the 20th Century* packs the mini-biographies of over 140 eminent scholars of the twentieth Gregorian century. These unique surveys will not be found anywhere else in English, and the style of their presentation is unique as well, since the author has written them up as an *isnādīc* or “traditive” dictionary of the period: he not only presents the details one expects to find in a survey of lives and works but also lists the prominent teachers each scholar took from, the students each scholar taught, and finally the *ijāza* or certificates of transmission that were obtained or handed out. Thus Ahmad’s work constitutes not only the first systematic English biobibliography of the period but also the first original exemplar of the synchronic and diachronic layer network of its ulema in English. Because of this latter aspect, he joins the host of Muslim authors who wrote in the specifically Islamic-*tārīkh* genre—in the above-mentioned sense of the hadith scholars—from such luminaries as al-Bukhārī in *al-Tārīkh* to our shared teachers Muḥammad Muṭī‘ al-Ḥāfiẓ and Yūsuf al-Mar‘ashlī with their large historical bio-bibliographies.

Each entry typically lists the scholar’s biographical data and places of study, then what they taught and where; what they wrote and/or published; how they distinguished themselves in their scholarly contributions and deeds; and where the latter two aspects put them on the map of the Muslim beacons of intellect and pious paradigms in the path of the Prophet—upon him blessings and peace. Entries often mention anecdotes representative of the scholar’s mentality and practice, picture-like in their evocative force and therefore more motivational for the reader than merely factual lists of achievements. One example is the Ramaḍān practice of the Indian scholar Shaykh Khalil Aḥmad al-Sahāranfūrī (spelled Saharanpuri in the book) (1269-1346/1852-1928) while in Madina:

When the month of Ramadaan arrived, he dedicated most of his time to the Quraan. He engaged in recitation of the Quraan after Fajr for a considerable amount of time. Then after a short nap, he would [go] to the Mosque before midday and after Zhuhr he

would return home where his wife listened to his [reading of the] Quraan. After Asr he would proceed for a short while to Mawlana Sayid Ahmad [brother of Shaykh Husayn Ahmad Madani] home before going to the Prophet's Mosque for breaking his fast with a few dates and some Zam Zam (*sic*) water. After maghrib, he would recite two Juz of the Quraan in Nafil (voluntary) Salaat. Many times, Shaykh Zakariya [al-Kandihlawi (1315-1402/1897-1981)] would listen to his heartfelt recitation. After performing Esha in the Prophet's Mosque, he would return to perform *Taraweeh* behind *Qari* Muhammad Tawfeeq, who recited two juz with ease and tranquility. This would end at about 12:30 a.m. and he would rest from about 1:30 a.m. until 3:30 a.m. Thereafter, he would listen to two juz of the Quraan by two students of Madrasah Shariyah while praying with each in voluntary (Nafil) Salaat. He liked listening to the Qiraat (recitation) according to the narration of Naafi'. (p. 57)

Such were the Qurʾān-centered lives of those to whom Allah Most High granted peace of heart, firmness in faith, and success toward helping themselves and others on His paths of righteousness—may Allah Most High have mercy on all of them. They are, as Imām al-Nawawī said, our spiritual parents who gave us birth and raised us for the life of the Hereafter.

The book begins with the notice on Shaykh Muhammad al-Ushmuni (1218-1321/1803-1903) and ends with that of Shaykh Ahmad Naseeb al-Mahameed (1330-1421/1912-2000) and thus proceeds not alphabetically but chronologically. Hence readers with no prior idea of the birth and death dates of particular scholars will have to go through the entire list provided at the beginning of the book, as there is no alphabetical index either. Among the book's other flaws which a second edition can remedy: the English—grammar, spelling, style—is not up to par and needs a thorough revision including transliteration; the typeset, layout and design are home-made; it is a reference-work without a single index!; entries are devoid of bibliographies and there is only a final two-page bibliography in Arabic, so one remains clueless from where the details for each individual scholar came. The book has no ISBN and no distribution outside its South African home that this reviewer knows of, a great loss for English-speaking Muslims or rather for the public at large. Finally, there is the inexcusable absence of a giant scholar of the century, Ahmad Rida Khan of Breilly, India (1272-1340/1856-1921), whom his followers consider a Renewer of the period and whose scholarly output and influence more than warranted inclusion into this volume—which the author has promised to ensure for the second edition. In the meantime readers might want to look up Usha Sanyal's 146-page volume at Oxford's Oneworld, *Ahmad Riza Khan Bareilwi: In the Path of the Prophet* (2005).

GIBRIL FOUAD HADDAD
Brunei Darussalam