

## Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī



Figure 1 `Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī, a colleague who finished one of Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī's biographical works after his death.

Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī was born in 1145 H /1732 CE in Belgaon, India, in Karnataka near Goa, and died in 1205/1790. As a young man he migrated to Yemen, to the city of Zabīd along the coastal road to al-Hudaydah, but lived most of his life in Cairo. He was a Naqshbandī Sufi who followed the Ḥanafī legal school, and knew Arabic, Turkish and Persian. His most outstanding work is the Arabic dictionary

*Tāj al-`Arūs / The Bride's Crown.*

The *Tāj al-`Arūs*, along with *Lisān al-`Arab / The Language of the Arabs*, was the main dictionary that the Englishman Edward W. Lane relied upon to produce his famous *Arabic-English Lexicon* (published 1863–1893). Lane had a hand-written copy made of this dictionary, which concluded with Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī's statement that he took fourteen years to compile his work. Lane describes this dictionary this way: "It is a compilation from the best and most copious of the preceding Arabic lexicons and other lexicological works, in the form of an interwoven commentary on the *Qāmūs* (of Firūzabādī); exhibiting fully and clearly, from the original sources, innumerable explanations which are so abridged in the latter work as to be unintelligible to the most learned men of the East; with copious illustration of the meanings &c, corrections of mistakes in the *Qāmūs* and other lexicons, and examples in prose and verse; and a very large collection of additional words and significations, mentioned under the roots to which they belong." The manuscript Lane used was twenty-four "thick quarto-volumes" stored in the great mosque of Al-Azhar in Cairo.

By the time Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī compiled his dictionary, many words had become obscure. Previous dictionaries would put *ma'lūm* next to the word entry, meaning 'well-known' or obvious. While this worked fine for words that maintained their meaning over the centuries, other terms had become the opposite of *ma'lūm*. By combing through dozens of manuscripts of many books, he was able to bring back into definition these lost or archaic meanings.

From another great work, his giant commentary on al-Ghazālī's classic *Iḥyā' `Ulūm al-Dīn* titled *Ithāf al-Sādat al-Muttaqīn*, we can readily see his encyclopaedic knowledge of *ḥadīth* literature and Sufi writings. This work is over 11,000 pages in

the modern published edition. Here, for example, we have al-Ghazali describing the journey of the soul after death, but with al-Zabīdī's commentary taking each key word in a sentence and providing many *ḥadīth* references, some quite obscure or rare, to unpack their meaning and implications.

One may contrast the political decline of Muslim states in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the vitality of the Islamic networks of study, research, and intellectual-cultural production. A leading scholar such as al-Zabīdī taught students from Morocco to Yemen to Sumatra who would later become influential scholars themselves. The existence of these networks of scholars prompted German researchers in the last decade to investigate Islamic networks, because state-by-state or even regional studies did not capture these connections. Stefan Reichmuth, author of *The World of Murtaḍa al-Zabidi: Life, Networks and Writings*, found the idea of world systems introduced by Immanuel Wallerstein to be more productive of research. Connecting this with ideas from John Voll, Reichmuth looked at 'Islam' not merely as regional or state-bound but rather within an interconnected sphere of trans-continental communication. This approach allows us to appreciate al-Zabīdī's influence as a scholar in the tumultuous 18<sup>th</sup> century. Reichmuth's study was complemented by the Indonesian scholar Azyumardi Azra in his *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern 'Ulama' in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (2004). Azra points to the importance of the influential commentary on Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* entitled *Sayr al-Sālikīn* by the leading Sumatran scholar 'Abd al-Ṣamad al-Palembānī; this work remains popular in religious schools in Indonesia and Malaysia today. Both al-Palembānī and al-Zabīdī studied together under the same Shaykhs in Arabia, and their commentaries exhibit clear similarities in approach.

Besides the religious and political importance of these Islamic networks, we learn a number of other valuable lessons from the life of Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī. As with so many of the great scholars of Islam, we read and benefit from their work without always knowing biographical details that today seem so important. We often do not know the ethnicity of these great scholars without extensive digging; we might not suspect that for some Arabic was one of their many languages; we might not realize the importance of the women teachers they had; and we might not recognize that for most of our history, scholars actively participated in Sufi orders with far-flung global connections, as well as adhering to legal schools. Reviving and energizing such international corridors of communication within the *ummah* should be taken as one important means of facilitating the renewal of Islamic civilisation today.