Introduction

ʿĀʾishah al-Bāʿuniyyah (d. 923/1517) was an exceptional Muslim scholar. She was a mystic, and a prolific poet and writer, composing more works in Arabic than any other woman prior to the twentieth century. In her writings, ʿĀʾishah often speaks of her abiding love for God and His prophet Muḥammad, and her quest for mystical union. These concerns are central to *The Principles of Sufism*, a mystical guide book that ʿĀʾishah compiled to help others on this spiritual path. Drawing lessons and readings from a centuries-old Sufi tradition, ʿĀʾishah advises the seeker to repent of selfishness and turn to a sincere life of love. Fundamental to this transformation is the recollection of both human limitations and God’s limitless love. In *The Principles of Sufism*, ʿĀʾishah recounts important stages and states on the path toward mystical union, as she urges her readers to surrender themselves to God and willingly accept His loving grace.

Life

ʿĀʾishah al-Bāʿuniyyah was born in Damascus in the second half of the fifteenth century AD. She came from a long line of religious scholars and poets, originally from the small village of Bāʿūn in southern Syria. In search of education and employment, members of the Bāʿūnī family eventually made their way to Damascus, and for several generations, they served the Mamlūk sultans of Egypt and Syria. ʿĀʾishah’s father Yūsuf (d. 880/1475) was a scholar of Shāfiʿī jurisprudence and rose to prominence as the chief judge in
Damascus. He made sure that all of his children received a fine education, and so ‘Ā’ishah, together with her five brothers, studied the Qur’an, the traditions of the prophet Muḥammad, jurisprudence, and poetry.1 ‘Ā’ishah mentions that she had memorized the entire Qur’an by the age of eight, and that, as a teen or young woman, she went with her family on the Hajj pilgrimage, during which she had a vision of the prophet Muḥammad:

God, may He be praised, granted me a vision of the Messenger when I was residing in holy Mecca. By the will of God the Exalted, an anxiety had overcome me, and so I resolved to visit the holy sanctuary. It was Friday night, and I reclined on a couch on an enclosed veranda overlooking the holy Kaaba and the sacred precinct. It so happened that a man there was reading a poem on the life of God’s Messenger, and voices rose with blessings upon the Prophet. Then, I could not believe my eyes—it was as if I was standing among a group of women. Someone said, “Kiss the Prophet!” and a dread came over me that made me swoon until the Prophet passed before me. So I sought his intercession and, with a stammering tongue, I said to God’s Messenger, “O my master, I ask you for intercession!” Then I heard him say calmly and deliberately, “I am the intercessor on the Judgment Day.”

As part of her education, ‘Ā’ishah also studied Sufism, which was the general practice of the Bā‘ūnī family. One of her great uncles had been a Sufi ascetic, while another uncle had been the director of a Sufi chantry in Damascus. Moreover, members of the Bā‘ūnī family, including ‘Ā’ishah’s father, were buried in a family plot near the lodge of the Sufi master Abū Bakr ibn Dāwūd (d. 806/1403). This shaykh was affiliated with the ‘Urmawi branch of the Qādirīyyah Sufi order to which the Bā‘ūnī family belonged, and in a number of her writings, ‘Ā’ishah specifically praised her two Qādirī masters, Jamāl al-Dīn Ismā‘īl al-Ḥawwārī (d. 900/1495), and his successor, Muḥyī al-Dīn Yahyā al-‘Urmawi (fl. eleventh century/sixteenth century):
My education and development, my spiritual effacement and purification, occurred by the helping hand of the sultan of the saints of his time, the crown of the pure friends of his age, the beauty of truth and religion, the venerable master, father of the spiritual axes, the axis of existence, Ismā‘īl al-Ḥawwārī, may God sanctify his heart and be pleased with him, and, then, by the helping hand of his successor in spiritual states and stations, and in spiritual proximity and union, Muḥyī al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-ʿUrmawī, may God continue to spread his ever-growing spiritual blessings throughout his lifetime, and join us every moment to his blessings and succor.3

The Bā‘ūnis were a prominent family in Damascus, so ʿĀ‘ishah married a man known as Ibn Naqīb al-Ashrāf, the son of another distinguished family there who were descendants of the prophet Muḥammad. ʿĀ‘ishah’s husband’s full name was Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Ibn Naqīb al-Ashrāf (d. 909/1503), and he, too, was a devotee of shaykh Ismā‘īl al-Ḥawwārī. ʿĀ‘ishah and Aḥmad had at least two children together: a son, ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (897–925/1489–1519), and a daughter, Barakah (born 899/1491). In AD 1513, ʿĀ‘ishah, by then a widow, left Damascus for Cairo with her son to seek a job for him in the Mamlūk administration. En route, bandits ambushed their caravan in the Egyptian delta and stole everything, including all of ʿĀ‘ishah’s books. As a result, ʿĀ‘ishah and her son were destitute when they arrived in Cairo, but they received the assistance of a family friend, Maḥmūd ibn Muḥammad ibn Ajā (d. 925/1519), the foreign minister and confidential secretary of the Mamlūk sultan, al-Ghawrī (r. 906–22/1501–16). Ibn Ajā generously provided for them and employed ʿĀ‘ishah’s son as a secretary in the chancellery.

ʿĀ‘ishah spent the next three years in Cairo where she studied jurisprudence with a number of scholars. She graciously accepted Ibn Ajā’s financial support, for which she praised him in several poems, and she continued to write and compose new works. Then, in AD 1516, ʿĀ‘ishah left Cairo with her son, who had been assigned
to accompany Ibn Ajā to Aleppo. There, the Sultan al-Ghawrī was preparing for war against the Ottomans to the north, yet he took the time to hold a personal audience with ŢĀ‘ishah. ŢĀ‘ishah then returned to her native Damascus, where she died soon thereafter in AD 1517. Our sources do not tell us why al-Ghawrī met with ŢĀ‘ishah, though al-Ghawrī was quite fond of Arabic poetry, and so was probably familiar with ŢĀ‘ishah’s poetic reputation. It is also possible that the sultan sought ŢĀ‘ishah’s spiritual blessings for his trials ahead, for it is quite apparent from accounts of ŢĀ‘ishah al-Bā‘uniyyah by her contemporaries that she was highly regarded as a pious woman and Sufi master.4

**Thought and Work**

As an educated Muslim woman, ŢĀ‘ishah al-Bā‘uniyyah was privileged, but she was by no means unique within medieval Muslim society. Throughout the Middles Ages, there was a significant number of educated Muslim women, though few of them wrote original works. ŢĀ‘ishah al-Bā‘uniyyah was truly exceptional for having composed over a dozen works of prose and poetry, praised by a number of her contemporaries. Today, many of ŢĀ‘ishah’s writings are lost, but we know from surviving manuscripts and from her own statements that much of her work addressed mystical themes and praised the prophet Muḥammad.5 ŢĀ‘ishah composed a number of laudatory accounts of Muḥammad’s life and prophetic career (*mawlids*), which combined prose and poetry. In fact, celebration of the Prophet appears to have been ŢĀ‘ishah’s vocation, perhaps undertaken, in part, thanks to her vision of him while on pilgrimage. ŢĀ‘ishah also composed a considerable amount of verse, including two collections of poetry that still survive. One, simply entitled *The Collected Verse of ŢĀ‘ishah al-Bā‘uniyyah* (*Dīwān ŢĀ‘ishah al-Bā‘uniyyah*), which ŢĀ‘ishah composed during her stay in Cairo, contains six long poems praising the prophet Muḥammad. Among them is an ode incorporating al-Būṣīrī’s (d. 694/1295) celebrated panegyric to Muḥammad, *The Mantle Ode (al-Burdah)*,6
and ʿĀʾishah’s most famous poem, *Clear Inspiration in Praise of the Trusted Prophet* (*al-Fath al-mubin fi madḥ al-Amin*). This latter work is a *badiʿiyyah*, a complex type of poem popular during the Mamlūk period, which praises the Prophet while illustrating various rhetorical schemes (*badiʿ*). 'Āʾishah composed one hundred and thirty verses for her *Clear Inspiration*, each containing a praiseworthy attribute or action of the Prophet illustrated by a rhetorical device (e.g., antithesis, alliteration). 'Āʾishah consciously patterned this long ode on similar poems from earlier poets of the Mamlūk period, and she further displays her extensive knowledge of Arabic verse in her commentary on the poem in which she refers to nearly fifty earlier poets.  

The second surviving collection of ʿĀʾishah’s verse is entitled *Emanation of Grace and the Gathering Union* (*Fayḍ al-faḍl wa-jamʿ al-shaml*) and contains over 370 poems, spanning ʿĀʾishah’s mystical life from her “days as a novice and student, to her mastery of the branches of mystical annihilation and the arts of effacement.” In her introduction to this collection, ʿĀʾishah notes that many of these poems were inspired by God and represent intimate conversations with Him regarding spiritual states and mystical matters. Nearly every poem is preceded by the phrase, “From God’s inspiration upon her,” and in many instances, this is followed by a few additional words regarding the poem’s composition, such as “when rapture was intense,” or “from His inspiration upon her during a session of mystical audition.” Such autobiographical information for poems is rare in any literary tradition, yet ʿĀʾishah al-Bāʿuniyyah wished to share aspects of her mystical life with her readers.

In many of the later poems in *Emanation of Grace*, ʿĀʾishah confidently assumes the role of the Sufi master who guides the spiritual novice, and this shift is clear in one of her longest poems in the collection. Composed of 252 verses and modeled on Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s (d. 632/1235) Sufi classic *Poem of the Sufi Way* (*Naẓm al-sulūk*), ʿĀʾishah’s long ode takes up a number of similar Sufi themes. Both poems rhyme in the letter “t” and praise the wine of love, spiritual
intoxication, and union with the divine Beloved. ʿĀ’ishah also follows Ibn al-Fāriḍ when she invokes the “ancient covenant” as the original source of her love for God. In Sufi circles, this phrase refers to the “Day of the Covenant” (yawm al-mīthāq) alluded to in the Qur’an (Q A’rāf 7:172):

«And when your Lord drew from the loins of the children of Adam their progeny and made them bear witness against themselves: “Am I not your Lord?” They said, “Indeed, yes! We so witness . . .”»

ʿĀ’ishah al-Bā‘uniyyah, Ibn al-Fāriḍ, and many other Sufis believed that God called forth humanity to take this covenant prior to creation, thus bringing about the original loving encounter between the divine spirit within each human being, and God. Recollection of this moment is thought to result in the annihilation of selfishness and the spirit’s return to abide lovingly in God’s oneness.

The Principles of Sufism

In her verse, ʿĀ’ishah al-Bā‘uniyyah often alludes to Sufi teachings, which she attempts to elucidate in her prose writings on Sufism. Those of her works that survive give us an idea of the mystical influences on her, which include al-Nawawī’s (d. 676/1277) book on prayer, The Book of Recollections (Kitāb al-Adhkār); al-Jurjānī’s (d. 816/1413) Sufi lexicon, The Book of Definitions (Kitāb al-Ta‘rīfāt), and al-Anṣārī’s (d. 481/1089) spiritual guidebook, Stages for the Wayfarers (Manāzil al-sā’irīn). Additional important sources for ʿĀ’ishah’s mystical ideas and teachings are most readily apparent in the Sufi guidebook she composed entitled al-Muntakhab fī uṣūl al-rutab fī ‘ilm al-taṣawwuf. Loosely rendered as The Principles of Sufism, a more exact translation is Selections on the Principles of the Stations in the Science of Sufism. “Selections” refers to ʿĀ’ishah’s many quotations that form the basis of this book, drawn from the Qur’an, hadith collections, Qur’anic commentaries, spiritual guidebooks, hagiographies, and mystical epistles by earlier Sufi masters,
including al-Kalābādhī (d. 380/995), al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), and especially, al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1074). ‘Ā’ishah also quotes a number of later Sufi authorities, including Ibn al-ʿArīf (d. 536/1141), ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234), and Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1309).

In the Principles of Sufism, ‘Ā’ishah compares Sufism to a tree with many branches, yet having four essential roots or principles: repentance (tawbah), sincerity (ikhlāṣ), recollection (dhikr), and love (maḥabbah). She discusses each principle in detail in separate sections, beginning each section with relevant verses from the Qur’an, along with Sufi commentaries on them. She then quotes a number of prophetic traditions, carefully noting her sources in most instances, demonstrating once again her extensive religious education and erudition. Next, ‘Ā’ishah cites aphorisms by early Muslim forbearers (salaf), and then sayings, teachings, and stories of later Sufi masters. ‘Ā’ishah concludes each section by integrating this material with her own observations on the subject and poetic verses inspired by God.

Throughout The Principles of Sufism, ‘Ā’ishah al-Bāʿuniyyah follows in the classical Sufi tradition by stressing God’s omnipotence, while affirming that the all-powerful God is also all-merciful and forgiving. A person seeking God’s favor must repent and discipline selfish human nature, so that God’s grace may be seen within the heart. Then, the believer can cultivate a sincere devotional life to God and serve humanity based on love. An essential means to attain and maintain a religious life of love is remembrance of God. ‘Ā’ishah quotes God’s vow in the Qur’an (Q Baqarah 2:152): «Remember Me, and I will remember you,» urging the seeker to pray and remember God often. In the Sufi tradition, remembrance also refers to the practice of meditation on God, which may lead to mystical union with Him. ‘Ā’ishah regards remembrance as both a process and a mystical state. As a process, remembrance of God is a way to purify oneself of selfishness and hypocrisy, and a means to ward off Satan. As a mystical state, remembrance differs in its effects depending
on the believer’s spiritual level; common people are calmed and blessed by praising God, while religious scholars who think about God gain theological insight into His nature. By contrast, the practice of remembrance among the spiritually advanced mystics leads to their purification and a tranquil state in God. For a powerful remembrance, ‘Ā’ishah recommends that seekers recite and meditate on the declaration of faith found in the Qur’an (Q Muḥammad 47:19): «There is no deity but God!»

In The Principles of Sufism, ‘Ā’ishah singles out verses from the Qur’an and traditions from Muḥammad regarding God’s love of humanity and His promise to forgive the sins of those who repent. ‘Ā’ishah urges all sincere believers to love God, His prophet Muḥammad, and fellow believers. Significantly, for those graced by God, this love will eradicate selfishness and even the sense of self, as God overwhelms them in union with Him. ‘Ā’ishah reinforces this point with a saying popular among the Sufis known as the “Tradition of Willing Devotions”:

God said, “My servant draws near to Me by nothing more loved by Me than the religious obligations that I have imposed upon him, and My servant continues to draw near to Me by acts of willing devotion such that I love him. Then, when I love him, I become his ear, his eye, and his tongue; his heart and reason; his hand and support.”

‘Ā’ishah states that love is God’s greatest secret; it is an endless sea without a shore which many people and religions of the past have tasted, but none more so than the most blessed of all creation, the prophet Muḥammad, and his spiritual, saintly descendants (awliyā’, lit. “protected friends”). God has transformed them and all those He loves by means of a mystical experience beyond description. Their hearts then become places of spiritual vision where the truth of the divine essence is revealed. As love draws seekers ever closer to their divine Beloved, God bestows His love as an act of unearned grace. Ultimately, the lovers lose all sense of self when
the truth of oneness appears, and their mystical death leads them to the bliss of eternal life, as ʿĀʾishah declares in verse at the end of *The Principles of Sufism*.

God looked with favor on a folk,
so they stayed away
from worldly fortunes.
In love and devotion, they worshipped Him;
they surrendered themselves
with the best intention.
They gave themselves up to Him
and passed away from existence
with nothing left behind.
Then with kindness and compassion,
He turned to them
and revealed to them His essence.
And they lived again
gazing at that living face
as His eternal life appeared.