

## Al-Shushtarī

### Biographical notes

A great mystical poet from Andalusia, his full name was Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Numayrī al-Shushtarī. He was born in the village of Shushtar outside Guadix, near Granada, in 610/1212 – this was the year of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in central Spain, where the Muslim army suffered a decisive defeat at the hands of a Christian coalition of Portuguese and Spanish knights, and it ushered in a time of great upheaval in al-Andalus as the *reconquista* began in earnest (eg Cordoba fell to Ferdinand III of Castile in 1236, Seville in 1248).

Al-Shushtarī’s family were well-to-do believers, and he studied the normal Andalusī curriculum: Quran and hadith, Arabic and Andalusī literature, as well as as *fiqh* (jurisprudence). He seems to have lived in both Malaga and Granada, before travelling to North Africa as a merchant. He met and studied with several disciples of Abu Madyan (d. 1197), as well as those of Abū Ḥafṣ ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234), but the major turning-point in his life came when he met his real master, Ibn Sab‘īn, in Bijāya (in modern Algeria) in 646/1248.

Transformed by this meeting, al-Shushtarī became a ‘slave’ of Ibn Sab‘īn and began to travel as a preacher and musician, either following his master or alone, going from fair to fair dancing and singing his verses. They were sung in the form of a *zajal*, accompanied by tambourines, other instruments and often with a choir of disciples.

Al-Shushtarī’s spiritual accomplishments and wisdom did not go unnoticed: he was invited to Tripoli to become a judge (*qadi*), which would have been a complete contrast to the kind of life he had been leading thus far. He refused, and went instead to teach at the al-Azhar mosque in Cairo. In 1249 he fought against the Crusaders from his *ribāṭ* (fortress-monastery) in Damietta. He had been put in charge of all Ibn Sab‘īn’s disciples there and later travelled to be with his master in Damascus and Mecca. While in Egypt and Syria, al-Shushtarī was keen to nurture dialogue with Christian monks, encouraging interfaith discussions and becoming familiar with their teachings and customs. Some have viewed his mention of the drinking of wine as an allusion to the Christian Eucharist, although it is far more likely to be in the Sufī tradition expressed by Ibn al-Fārīd and others, where wine symbolises the love of the Essence.

After Ibn Sab‘īn died in Mecca in /1269, al-Shushtarī was persecuted by orthodox Muslims and fell ill. Like his master, he was regarded with suspicion because of his supposed adherence to the doctrine of incarnation (*ḥulūl*). He died in the same year, 668/1269, near Damietta.

## **Zajal and Muwashshah**

The *zajal* is a traditional form of oral strophic poetry declaimed in a colloquial dialect, which could be easily understood by common people – it is an ancient art form in the Mediterranean, similar to the *muwashshah* (which Shushtarī also employed): semi-improvised, semi-sung, it is similar in certain ways to the French troubadour tradition. These days *zajal* is very popular in Lebanon, where *zajal* poets go on tour at home and abroad, performing to audiences of thousands.

The Andalusī tradition was particularly rich in this kind of strophic poetry, which appears to have developed in contrast to the cultural norms of looking to the East as the example to emulate. The style of *muwashshah* is traditionally thought to have begun in Islamic Spain with Ibn Quzman (Guzman) (d. 1160). It consists of an optional introductory stanza (*matla'*), a prelude that introduces the common rhyme; the following five verses follow a pattern of three plus two common (eg if the prelude is *yz*, the following sections are *aaayz*, *bbbyz*, *cccyz* etc). It ends with another two-line stanza (*yz*), known in Arabic as the *kharja* ('exit'). The whole poem is written in classical Arabic or Hebrew, apart from the *kharja* which is usually in colloquial Arabic or maybe Romance. The *zajal*, on the other hand, is written entirely in colloquial Arabic.

Given that the great mystic Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) had already used the *muwashshah* and *zajal* forms as a vehicle for mystical expression, it is unsurprising that al-Shushtarī chose to employ them as his poetic model, but he took the form to a new level.

“Ibn 'Arabī's *muwashshahāt* feel stiff and uneasy, not unlike what one might expect if a theologian with only passing knowledge of hip-hop culture began writing religious raps. By contrast, it was al-Shushtarī's special talent to use popular song and informal diction to talk about the divine. His were songs that could be enjoyed and interpreted at many levels, songs that not only rejected rank and privilege and championed voluntary poverty, but themselves spoke in the simple and unexalted language of daily life... The host of a prestigious and widely broadcast Sufi radio show has called him 'the greatest mystic poet of Islamic Spain and North Africa'. It would be hard to overstate his importance. Shushtarī, then, might be understood as the Rumi of Western Islam.” (Alvarez, *Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī*, intro.)

## **Bibliography:**

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