

THE CONCEPTS OF *SHAFĀ'AH* AND *ISTIGHĀTHAH* (INTERCESSION AND SUCCOUR) IN THE SOKOTO CALIPHATE

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Abstract

Shafā'ah and *Istighāthah* are both Sufi terminologies that have become controversial areas of discourse. While *Shafā'ah* is intercession and pleading on behalf of someone with Allah on the Day of Judgement *Istighāthah* is the saving power of *Awliyā'* Allah and seeking help from them dead or alive. These have also attracted serious debate between the Sufi followers and the non-Sufis especially the *Izalah* group and in most cases condemnation from the non-Sufi groups. References are often made to both the Glorious *Qur'an* and *Hadīth* literature to justify the correctness or otherwise of the application of the two concepts in daily life. This paper looked at the perspective of the Sokoto Jihad leaders in application of *Shafā'ah* and *Istighāthah* as they understood and believed in them. The literary contributions of the Jihad leaders in this subject-matter have been studied to justify their belief and practice of intercession and saving power of some individuals, *al-Qur'an*, the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), his *Sahābah* and other righteous servants of Allah. However, the paper contends that the commitment and approach of the Jihad leaders to these Sufi terms were done without any ulterior motive but which unfortunately led to veneration of tombs of *Awliyā'* and other servants of Allah (S.W.T). Some practices among some contemporary Sufi followers require critical examination especially that some non-Sufis likened them to polytheism. The paper recommends that the pristine moderate approach to spiritual and ethical training established by the Jihad leaders should be adhered to for an acceptable *Shafā'ah* and *Istighāthah*.

Key Words: *Shafā'ah*, *Istighāthah*, intercession, succor, Sokoto Caliphate

1. Introduction

The two concepts, *Shafā'ah* and *Istighāthah* are part of the controversial aspects of *Tasawwuf*. Even though the Sufis believe that the concepts have a root in the Glorious *Qur'an* and *Hadīth*, some scholars strongly reject the way the concepts are being interpreted by the Sufis which gives room for *Awliyā'* to claim saving powers in both this world and the Day of Judgment. These concepts are part of Sufi legacies bequeathed by the Sokoto Jihad leaders. They examined the concepts in the light of the *Sharī'ah* and indicated when and where they are allowed and when and where they are not allowed, buttressing their contentions with examples from the past *Awliyā'*.

When one examines the verses of the Glorious *Qur'an*, one finds references to the concept of *Shafā'ah*. However, the understanding of the concept depends largely in the context in which it has been used. The exclusive power to grant permission for intercession rests with Allah. No one, not even a Prophet can intercede without the permission of Allah. That is why *al-Qur'an* describes as futile the efforts of those who sought for intercession, with Allah, from either animates or inanimate.¹ Therefore, for one to merit being

¹ *Qur'an* 2 verse 44, 21 verse 28, 19 verse 87.

interceded for with Allah, one has to be a good Muslim and should have sent forth good deeds upon which the person granted the power of intercession can intercede with Allah on his behalf. This means that belonging to a brotherhood or attaching oneself to a *Walī* does not help one if one is not a believer and practicing Muslim. There are many verses related to this contention. In the Qur'an For example, Allah says:

None shall have the power of intercession, but such a one as has received permission (or promise) from (God) Most Gracious²

Another verse says:

And those whom they invoke instead of Him have no power of intercession - except for those who bear witness to the truth knowingly and they know³

In another verse, the types of persons to be saved have been made clear. They are the people who have faith in Allah, follow the commands of Allah, keep away from prohibitions and repent at any time. These are the people on whose behalf the Angels will intercede with Allah. Similarly, there are some conditions to be fulfilled by those who could claim saving powers. One of such conditions is the permission from Allah.

Any claimant to such power, without an assurance from Allah is an impostor. The second condition is that the saving person must have been a believer to the truth⁴. In other words, he must be a good believer whose belief is unadulterated.

The inference from the above discussion is that power of intercession is not a gift to all and sundry, but it has been reserved for some people. This, therefore, brings to light the criticism of those who are very critical about the concept of *Shafā'ah* as interpreted by *Sufi* Shaykhs⁵ whose doctrines bestowed upon *Awliyā'* the power to intercede with Allah (SWT) on behalf of their followers without any discrimination⁶.

The conditions laid down in the verses of the Qur'an for both saving persons and the people who merit to be saved indicate that the generality of believers have shares in both the saying powers and the privilege to be saved. Such should not be limited to Sufis and *Sufi* Orders only.

Hadīth literature had also asserted the saving powers of some individuals. For example the *Shafā'ah* of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) on some groups of Muslims is found in *Hadīth* literature. In one of such *AHādīth*, it is related that on the Day of Judgment people would go to Adam, requesting him to intercede with Allah on their behalf. He would direct them to Prophet Nuh (A.S.) who would also refer them to Prophet Ibrahim (A.S.), and Prophet Ibrahim to Prophet Musa (A.S.) and Musa to Prophet Isa (A.S.) who would ask them to approach Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.). Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) would humbly proceed to the presence of Allah for the intercession; and Allah would grant him the power to intercede.⁷ In another *Hadīth* it was reported that the Prophet (S.A.W.) used to slip out of bed in the night to go to the grave yard of *Baqi'ah* and pray for the dead.⁸

² Q19: 67

³ Q43:86

⁴ Q43:86

⁵ *Izalatul Bid'ah wa iqamatis Sunnah* is among them.

⁶ Ahmad al-Tijani promised his *Shafā'ah* to all his followers even if a follower commits a sin equivalent to murder of 70 people. This is only demonstrating his saving power but not a license for a follower to engage in unwholesome behavior.

⁷ Imam Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari, Kitab al-Tawhid*, section 19

⁸ Imam Muslim, *Sahih al-Muslim, kitab al-Janazah*, section 59

During the early period of the development of *Tasawwuf*, *Shafā'ah* was used as the quality for identifying people of Allah. Such people are reported to possess the power to intercede with Allah on behalf of others on the Day of Judgment. In such *Sufi* literature, Uways al-Qarani occupies an important position. His coming was said to have been foretold by the Prophet (S.A.W). The Prophet (S.A.W) was also reported to have attributed saving powers to Uways. He will, in the Hereafter, intercede with Allah on behalf of people whose number is estimated to reach the population of Rabi'atu and Mudar tribes.⁹

Rabi'ah al-Adawiyyah, another early woman saint was also described by the Prophet (S.A.W) as a *Walī yah* who would intercede with Allah for seventy thousand people from the *Ummah* (community) of the Prophet (S.A.W).¹⁰ Even though it is possible that the two *AHādith* relating to the two saints could be fabrication, it is noteworthy that the concept was known in the early period of *Tasawwuf*. Later, after the foundation of *Sufi* Orders, the power of intercession became synonymous with leadership in *Sufi* Orders. Other *Awliyā'* within the *Sufi* Orders were also given the same recognition.

The founder and leader of Qadiriyyah Order, *Shaykh* AbdulQadir al-Jaylani is, as far as Qadiris are concerned, the leader of saving *Awliyā'* in the Order. It is believed by the Qadiriyyah followers that *Shaykh* AbdulQadir would intercede with Allah for them on the Day of Judgment. The magnanimity is also extended to those who might have heard of him provided that they do not speak evil of him.¹¹ His saving powers have been extensively discussed by the *Jihad* leaders. The founder of Tijaniyyah, *Shaykh* Ahmad al-Tijani is also regarded by his followers as their saving *Walī*.¹²

2. The concept of *Shafā'ah* in the Caliphate

In the Sokoto Caliphate, the belief in the saving power of *Awliyā'* had received favorable treatment. Majority of the people who had the belief were Qadiriyyah followers. From all indications the belief in *Shafā'ah* cut across *Sufi* Orders. It is also apparent from their writings that Invocation for *Shafā'ah* was not limited to the *Awliyā'* but rather extended to any creature considered Holy, hence, the search for *Shafā'ah* through the 'Qur'anic verses, Prophets of Allah, the Angels and the righteous people of Allah. Their discussions on variety of saving powers possessed by different *Awliyā'* are informative on this doctrine. The doctrine stresses the extent of the power of *Shafā'ah*.¹³

It is believed that it is not only the invocation of a *Walī's* powers of *Shafā'ah* according to the doctrine that guarantees the possibility of salvation, but also one's burial near the grave of a *Walī* may facilitate such a salvation.¹⁴

According to the *Jihad* leaders, the power of intercession of a *Walī* depends upon his relationship with Allah. Whereas a *Walī* will be granted the power to save uncountable number of people, like Uways al-Qarani, the power of others is limited to their own period,¹⁵ as against one whose power extends from his time to the end of the world like AbdulQadir al-Jaylani and Ahmad al-tijani. The *Jihad* leaders were also optimistic that anyone who clings to a *Walī* merits that *Walī's* *Shafā'ah*.¹⁶ This is discerned in their writings in

⁹ M. Bello, *Raf al-Ishtibah fi al-Ta'alluq bi Allah wa bi ahl Allah*, "Ms", C.I.S., 2/4/698.

¹⁰ A. J. Arberry, (trns), *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, *Op Cit.*, p.41.

¹¹ M. Bello, *al-Budur al-zahiriyyah fi Salasil al-Qadiriyyah*, "Ms" f. 36, 3/1/11

¹² M. Bello, *Raf al-Ishtibah fi al-Ta'alluq bi Allah wa bi ahl Allah*, "Ms", C.I.S., 2/4/698 f. 12b.

¹³ J. M. Kaura, "The *Sufi* Dimension in the Sokoto Caliphate", Ph.D Thesis, Department of Islamic Studies, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, 1991, p. 330.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 330

¹⁵ M. Bello, *Raf al-Ishtibah fi al-Ta'alluq bi Allah wa bi ahl Allah Op Cit.* p.4b

¹⁶ *Ibid*. p.4b

which they sought the *Shafā'ah* of *Awliyā'* such as 'AbdulQadir al-Jaylanl and Ahmad al-Rifa'i. A good example of this is reflected in the composition of Isa bn *Shaykh 'Uthmān* in which he invoked the *Shafā'ah* of his father.¹⁷

Muhammad Bello had extensively dealt with the issue of intercession concentrating significantly on the ability of saving *Walī* to intercede with Allah on behalf of others. According to him it is not all the people that could benefit from the *Shafā'ah* of a *Walī* that appears thereof. A good number of people may benefit from the *Shafā'ah* of a *Walī* and sometimes the benefit may go to only one person or even to none.¹⁸

Similarly, there could appear a *Walī* who intercedes on behalf of people without any condition. In other words, his saving power does not require allegiance to him or require any spiritual relationship between him and the person to be saved. Bello quoted Abu Yazid al-Bistami to justify the possibility of its occurrence. Al-Bistami was once asked by someone who requested him to guide him to 3 deeds that could draw him very close to Allah. His reply was:

Love the *Awliyā'* of Allah and they will love you. Surely Allah looks into their hearts; and He may see your name in the heart of His *Walī* and forgive you.¹⁹

It is also found among the *Awliyā'* a *Walī* on whose account Allah (SWT) forgives thousands of His servants.²⁰ Such servants include both the Sufis and non-Sufis. However, some *Awliyā'* such as al-Shadhili, restricted their saving powers to only those who received and practiced their *Wird*.²¹ Al-Shadhili promised to intercede for anyone who recites *Hizb al-Kabir*. That person will be saved by Allah from the greater trepidation and will merit the *Shafā'ah* of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.), and will be raised among *Awliyā' ullah* in the paradise.²² Similar promises were made by Ahmad al-Zarruq for those who observe his *Wazīfah*, the *Jumu'ah* prayers and fasting of Mondays and Thursdays. He promised them death within the precinct of Islam and salvation in the Day of Judgement and in this World protection from humiliation, and whenever they invoked his name for any help he will render it.²³

Seven people who had seen each other the first of whom had seen a particular *Walī* would all merit the intercession of that *Walī*. The only condition attached to it is that the seven people would in succession say that "I have seen you". If this condition is fulfilled, the seven people have been promised paradise by the great *Qutb* AbdurRahman al-Tha'alabi.²⁴ *Shaykh 'Uthmān* observed that such a promise by the pious people is allowed under the *Sharī'ah*. He said:

It cannot be disputed by either reason or *Sharī'ah*. This is because the bounty of Allah is so great that it cannot be quantified. The *Awliyā'* of Allah are gate-ways through whom He manifests His bounty. They have a sublime position with their Lord the magnanimous, the bounty giver.²⁵

There are also *Awliyā'* whose *Shafā'ah* is limited to people upon whom they set their eyes. Ibn al-Arabī, according to Bello was among such *Awliyā'*. The premises upon which this belief is based is that the saving *Walī* does not forget anyone he sees and would, therefore, intercede for him on the Day of Judgement.²⁶ Praying behind a saving *Walī* and reading his book

¹⁷ M. Hiskett, *the Development of Islam in west Africa*, Longman, London, 1984, p.248

¹⁸ M. Bello, *Raf'ul Ishtibah*, *op.cit.*, pp. 13a and b

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.p 6b – 7a

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.5b

²¹ The same claim was attributed to Al-Bakri who said that whoever recited Salat al-Fatih and does not enter paradise should hold him in front of Allah.

²² M. Bello, *Raf'ul Ishtibah*, *op.cit.*, p.5b

²³ *Ibid*, p.6a

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.5b

²⁵ U. B. Foduye, *Ajwabah al-Muharrarah*, pp. 30-31

²⁶ M. Bello, *Raf'ul Ishtibah*, *op.cit.* f. 5a

guarantees the intercession of the person who prayed behind him or read his book²⁷. Similarly love of a saving *Walī* or being buried by his side would qualify the lover or dead to benefit from the saving powers of the *Walī*.²⁸

From the above discussions on intercession, it appears that the *Jihad* leaders had seen nothing wrong in the concept of intercession. In fact, *Shaykh* 'Uthmān had thoroughly discussed the concept and concluded that phrases such as "*Midun Kalfani*"²⁹ and "*Kuna Tawlefi*"³⁰ all denoting "we seek for your help" are allowed. He had approved the use of such phrases on the ground that they are based "upon good opinion" of the *Walī* and the hope of the person beseeching for the intercession. Therefore, if such a person would attain the position of saving, he would be asked to save.³¹

The *Shaykh's* approval of this is also based on his understanding of the interpretation provided by Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli on the following verse:

The Day when no protector can avail his client in aught, and no help can they receive³²

According to Mahalli as quoted by *Shaykh* 'Uthmān:

They are believers and some of them would intercede on behalf of others with the permission of Allah.³³

His conclusion is therefore that *Sharī'ah* allows one to hope for what is expected to happen as against what would not occur. *Shaykh* 'Uthmān, Justifying his argument on the concept of *Shafā'ah* quoted the following *Hadīth*:

The *Awliyā'*, '*Ulamā'* and all good people are among those who would intercede on behalf of mankind on the Day of Judgment.³⁴

This was assumed by the *Shaykh* to Justify intercession on the Day of Judgment. Therefore since *Hadīth* has established it, there should not be any obstacle for laymen to invoke the names of *Awliyā'* for intercession on that Day.

3. *Al-Istighāthah* in the Caliphate

Al-Istighāthah is to plead with someone for the fulfillment of pressing needs in this world. This is done through different ways. In the Sokoto Caliphate, it is done not only through *Awliyā'* dead and living, but also through either godly people and verses of the Glorious Qur'an. AbdulQadir b. Gidado had extensively examined the issue in his book *Al-Iktifa' li ahl al-Ta'assi wa al-Iqtida'*. He argued that it is possible and allowed to use the agency of the contemporary *Awliyā'* to plead with them for the fulfillment of desires. He has justified this claim on the understanding that *Awliyā'* are intermediaries between mankind and Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) who is the gate-way of servants to Allah. 'AbdulQadir cited the examples of *Shaykh* 'AbdulQadir al-Jaylani who he considered as not only the gate-way to the Prophet (S.A.W.) but also to Allah (S.W.T).³⁵ This observation is more elaborately discussed by Bello in his *Budūr al-Zāhiriyyah* in which he made the following remarks in respect of *Shaykh* 'AbdulQadir al-Jaylani:

Shaykh 'AbdulQadir used to say who-ever asked for my *Istighāthah* (succor) in a calamity, I will surely remove (the calamity off him); and whoever calls me by my name in a distress I will remove his sorrow from him. Whoever pleads with me to Allah... for a pressing need I will fulfill his request...³⁶

²⁷ *Ibid*, f. 5 and 6a and b

²⁸ *Ibid. op. cit.*, ff. 5-6.

²⁹ Fulfulde Language

³⁰ Hausa Language

³¹ U. B. Foduye, *Ajwabah al-Muharrarah op.cit.* p.27

³² Q 44:41.

³³ U. B. Foduye, *Ajwabah al-Muharraah, op.cit.* p.28.

³⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 27-28.

³⁵ A. B. Gidado, *Al-Ikhtifa' li ahl al-Ta'assi Wa al-Iqtida, op.cit.* ff. 29b and b.

³⁶ M. Bello, *Al-Budur al-Zahiriyyah, op.cit.* f. 38a.

Even though they were accomplished Sufis, the *Jihad* leaders did not limit their *Istighāthah* to *Awliyā'* alone but extended it to the founders of the four schools of law³⁷. According to [°]AbdulQadir b. Gidado, a seeker of favour from Allah could use the agency of the four Imams, the leaders of Shadhiliyyah *Sufi* Order, and the past and present *Awliyā'*³⁸. Similarly, the four accomplished *Awliyā'*, namely *Shaykh* 'AbdulQadir al-Jaylani, *Shaykh* Ahmad al-Rifa'i, *Shaykh* Ahmad al-Badawi and *Shaykh* Ibrahim al-Dasuki were identified as *Awliyā'* capable of extending the request of a seeker who employed their intermediary to the Prophet (S.A.W) and Allah, the most High. Their position of *Wilāyah* as the leaders of *Awliyā'* and mankind has afforded them the power to extend the request of the seeker to the Prophet (S.A.W) and Allah (S.W.T).³⁹

Shaykh 'Uthmān bn Foduye had also attained the position of mediation between the servants and the Prophet (S.A.W). [°]AbdulQadir b. Gidado, like AbdulQadir b. al-Mustafa, believed that *Shaykh* 'Uthmān had been gifted with the blessing.⁴⁰ It has therefore become a common occurrence to Jihadists to invoke the name of the *Shaykh* in times of need. This was a palpable phenomenon in the battle fields whereby Muhammad Bello was seen invoking the name of the *Shaykh*. Names of the *Sahābah* of the Prophet (S.A.W.) were also used as medium through which *Istighāthah* was sought. The *Sahābah* were considered as having power to mediate with Allah and extend the request of the seeker to the Prophet (S.A.W). Similarly, verses of the Qur'an were also used as medium of *Istighāthah*. Accordingly, *Fatihah al-Kitāb*⁴¹ was for example used by the Sokoto *Jihad* leaders to extend their requests to Allah.⁴² In one of his sayings, as reported by the *Jihad* leaders, *Shaykh* 'AbdulQadir was reported to have said that:

Whoever prays two *Raka'āt* reciting *Surah al-Ikhlās* eleven times after *Fatihah al-Kitāb* in each *Raka'ah*; and then recites *Salāt 'alan Nabiyy* and mention my name and his needs, surely it would be fulfilled by the Grace of Allah.⁴³

The *Istighāthah* of *Shaykh* 'Uthmān had benefitted individuals in a distant place when they sought his help. Instances of these involved a man and a woman who benefitted from the *Istighāthah*. A man called Abdullah from Kano, a brother of *Qādī* Datti had his arms and clothes looted by a group of enemy during a campaign. When the enemy decided to kill him, Abdullah invoked the name of the *Shaykh* to use his *Karāmah* and rescue him. Immediately he invoked the *Shaykh's* name, the enemy changed their earlier decision, released him and his looted property was returned to him.⁴⁴ It is also reported that a woman met armed robbers on her way. She promised to take to the *Shaykh* three thousand cowries if Allah would deliver her from evils of the robbers. When she came near them, the robbers asked her with whom was she travelling, she answered with her husband. When they looked beyond her, they saw a well armed *Majusi*, (magus). They therefore allowed her to pass.⁴⁵

The *Shaykh's* power of *Istighāthah* is an accepted phenomenon in the Caliphate. His name was invoked by the Jihadists and it proved helpful. An instance could be seen from the way AbdulQadir b. al-Mustafa sought and benefitted from the *Istighāthah* of the *Shaykh*. 'AbdulQadir mentioned that:

...it occurred to me many times that I coveted for my pressing needs to be fulfilled by Allah. I, one day, engrossed myself in prayer beseeching *Awliyā'* ... While I was in this state, an invisible caller told me to invoke the

³⁷ The founders of the four schools of law are Malik bn Anas, (709-795), Abu Hanifah (697-767), Al-Shafi' (766-820) and Ahmad bn Hanbal (775-855)

³⁸ A. B. Gidado, *Al-Iktifa' li ahl al-Ta'assi wa al-iqtida*, *op.cit*, f.30b

³⁹ *Ibid*, f. 30a

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, f. 28a

⁴¹ It is the first chapter of the Glorious Qur'an.

⁴² A. B. Gidado, *Al-Iktifa'*, *op.cit*, p 31a.

⁴³ M. Bello, *Al-Budarul Zahiriyyah*, *op.cit*, p. 39a

⁴⁴ G. B. Lema, *Raudu'l Jinan*, Local Print.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, pp, 6-7

name of *Shaykh 'Uthmān*. I obeyed and, beseeched for (Shaykh's) help, and, Allah granted my desire in the morning of that night...From that time, (whenever I have pressing needs), I beseech the name of *Shaykh 'Uthmān*.⁴⁶

The belief that *Awliyā'* in general and *Shaykh 'Uthmān* in particular have the power to render help in this world, is an accepted belief not only in the circle of the Sufis but also among the populace. Despite frantic efforts to eradicate the belief in power of intercession among the populace, people persistently invoke the name of *Shaykh 'Uthmān* on a slight occurrence. For example *Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'ah wa Iqamatis Sunnah* has continuously criticized this doctrine and likened it to polytheism. Their line of argument is that it is only Allah who can render such help and therefore resorting to *Awliyā'* means negating the power of Allah.⁴⁷

4. Conclusion

The *Jihad* leaders, judging from what has been discussed, were *Sufi* scholars who enriched the concepts of *Shafā'ah* and *Istighāthah* with their knowledge and wealth of experience. What seems to have helped the development witnessed in these concepts could be the non-partisan attitudes of the leaders whereby they learnt by studying and reading the works of even non-Qadiri *Awliyā'*. Very importantly, information about the phenomenon of both *Shafā'ah* and *Ighathah* during the *Jihad* and post *Jihad* periods had been properly documented by some of them especially Muhammad Bello. The moderate form of *Tasawwuf* professed by the *Jihad* leaders especially in commitment to *Shafā'ah* and *Istighāthah* is reflected in their genuine approach to spiritual and ethical teachings. This was done without any ulterior motive. What had become of commitment to these concepts after their demise in the *Sufi* contemporary practice left much to be desired. The effect of ethical teachings is more discernable in their practical life style than the teachings. This goes a long way to display their commitment to the cause of Islam and their demonstration of Sufism parse.

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⁴⁶ A. B. Al-Mustafa, *Kashf' Al-Ghita' wa Ra'ib fī Dhikr Anwa' Mafatih al-Ghaib*, "MS", C.I.S., 4/3/31, f.9a.

⁴⁷ It is one of many arguments they use in their public preaching sermons partially meant to enlighten the Muslims on innovations contained by *Sufi* Orders

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