

**WHEN ISLAMIC SPIRITUALITY  
MEETS MAGIC:  
AḤMAD IBN ‘ALĪ AL-BŪNĪ (D. 622/1225) AND  
THE SCIENCE OF LETTERS**

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to provide a balanced and comprehensive reading of al-Būnī, who is mainly known as a scholar of Islamic magic, instead of a Sufi. This is because his name and works are widely known and referred in the Islamic world even into the present, including in Indonesia. To accomplish this agenda, this paper examines al-Būnī’s ideas on the science of letters across his works in order to determine how they are rooted in the principles of Islamic spirituality. From the examination of al-Būnī’s science of letters, it can be seen that Islamic spirituality underlies his works: in the centrality of God and in sober Sufi devotions such as *dhikr* and fasting, as the complement of the magical materials. Furthermore, while he was a respectable Sufi at that time, he also wrote books in which he explored the Arabic letters primarily from an Islamic spirituality approach. By combining magical practice and Islamic spirituality, al-Būnī provided practical Sufism for the masses.

Key words: al-Būnī, magic, science of letters, Sufi.

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## Introduction

IN THE ISLAMIC world in general, Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Būnī is one of the prominent scholars of the science of letters (*‘ilm al-ḥurūf*). In his *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldūn mentions his name along with Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240) as the main figures in this science.<sup>1</sup> Michel Chodkiewicz, however, maintains that the two are incommensurable. He even clarifies that, despite the connection between Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Būnī, Ibn ‘Arabī’s science of letters “has nothing to do with the magical events” and suggests the reader not be fooled by their similarity.<sup>2</sup>

Al-Būnī’s magical application of this science made him the most influential figure in Islamic magic.<sup>3</sup> As a result, al-Būnī became the object of accusation and condemnation and this

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<sup>1</sup>Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, vol. 3 (New York: Pantheon, 1958), 172. Al-Būnī and Ibn ‘Arabī are reported as having the same Shaykh, Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Mahdawī (d. 621/1224), the head of the center of Sufi instruction in Tunis, who was the master of esoteric knowledge. See Noah Gardiner, "Forbidden Knowledge? Notes on the Production, Transmission and Reception of the Major Works of Aḥmad al-Būnī," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, no. 12 (2012): 87-8.

<sup>2</sup>Michel Chodkiewicz, "Introduction: Toward Reading Futūḥāt Makkiyah," in *The Meccan Revelation*, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz (New York: Pir Press, 2004), 25.

<sup>3</sup>In the Islamic world, he is the figure most often associated with the books of magic. His role is undeniable throughout the Islamic world. Owen Davies refers to al-Būnī as a “famed magician,” and describes *Shams al-Ma’ārif*, al-Būnī’s most well-known book, as “the most influential magic book in the Arabic popular culture.” Omer Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books* (Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 2009), 27. The Arabic term closely related to the term magic is *siḥr*, although the latter is sometimes used to refer to sorcery or bewitchment. There is no single type of magic and Islamic scholars devoted different opinions on each of them. See Edgar Walter Francis, “Islamic Symbols and Sufi Rituals for Protection and Healing: Religion and Magic in the Writing of Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Būnī (d. 622/1225)” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, 2005), 56-71. Mushegh Asatrian, "Ibn Khaldūn on Magic and the Occult," *Iran & the Caucasus* 7 (2003): 71-123. T. Fahd, "Siḥr," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 9, 621-13.

science came to be considered a forbidden science.<sup>4</sup> Approximately a century later, Ibn Taymiyya accused al-Būnī and his kind of being star-worshippers who make deals with the devils.<sup>5</sup> Ibn Khaldūn said that al-Būnī was trespassing on God's exclusive right to the knowledge of the unseen (*al-ḡayb*) and the practice of sorcery.<sup>6</sup> Some modern readers have also condemned al-Būnī as the cause of the decadence of Islam.<sup>7</sup> Despite the negative comments on al-Būnī, there is positive commentary on his work. Denis Gril has mentioned that "although this summa esoteric knowledge appears to be more practical than contemplative, it is not devoid of a strict spiritual aspect."<sup>8</sup> Thus, there are two components that are embedded in al-Būnī's science of letters, i.e. magic and spirituality.

Due to the dominant appraisal of al-Būnī as a "magician," an elaboration on the other dimensions of al-Būnī's works, that is the dimension of Islamic spirituality, would help to provide a more comprehensive picture of his thoughts, a job this paper tries to carry out. The effort to provide a balanced reading of his works needs to be undertaken, considering how his name and works are widely known and used in the Islamic world even into the present, including in Indonesia.<sup>9</sup> To accomplish this agenda,

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<sup>4</sup>It is undeniable that during the tenth-fourteenth centuries, due to the complicated context at that time, there were excessive uses of occultism and esoteric science among Muslims. These practices became a threat to human society and orthodoxy. See Gardiner, "Forbidden Knowledge," 120-3. Yahya Michot, "Ibn Taymiyya on Astrology: Annotated Translation of Three Fatwas," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 11, no. 2 (2000): 145-50. Asatrian, "Ibn Khaldūn," 76-7, 123.

<sup>5</sup>Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' al-Fatāwa*, in Gardiner, "Forbidden Knowledge," 83.

<sup>6</sup>Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, 179-80.

<sup>7</sup>Gardiner, "Forbidden Knowledge," 129-30.

<sup>8</sup>Denis Gril, "The Science of Letters," in *The Meccan Revelations*, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz (New York: Pir Press, 2004), 142.

<sup>9</sup>Al-Būnī is a well-known figure in *pesantrons* (*madrasas*) in Indonesia. Martin van Bruinessen noted that al-Būnī's *Shams al-Ma'ārif al-Kubrā* and *Manbā' Uṣūl al-Hikma* are "the most influential works on *ḥikma*." Although they are not part of formal curriculum, they are widely used in *pesantrons* (*madrasas*) in Indonesia. See Martin van Bruinessen, "Kitab Kuning: Books

this paper studies al-Būnī's ideas on the science of letters across his works in order to determine how they are rooted in the principles of Islamic spirituality. Before proceeding to that analysis, his short biography and the discussion of the science of letters itself are covered.

### **Al-Būnī: a Short Biography**

While the role of al-Būnī in the world of the science of letters has been presented, this sub chapter provides his short biography. His name is 'Abd al-'Abbās Aḥmad ibn 'Alī ibn Yūsuf al-Qurashī al-Šūfī Muḥyi al-Dīn (Shihāb al-Dīn, Taqī al-Dīn) al-Būnī. His life remains a mystery; not much is known about his life. When he was born is unknown. The widely circulated report on his death in 622/1225 is from Hajji Khalīfa in his *Kashf al-Zunūn*. Furthermore, there are also different opinions on his origin. Instead of Egypt, modern scholars assert that he originally came from Buna, Algeria. Al-Būnī was one of the Magribī scholars who migrated to the East and finally died in Egypt.<sup>10</sup>

Al-Būnī is said to have forty or sixty works on the science of letters. Most of his works were acknowledged as not totally written by al-Būnī himself. Even though some books are regarded as his original works, there is a possibility that they are the product of the work of several generations while probably mixing these with their own works. There are divergent opinions on which books are his original books. His books considered as original are these: *Shams al-Ma'ārif wa Laṭā'if al-'Awārif*, *Kitāb Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt fī al-Ḥurūf al-'Alīyyāt*, *Manbā' Uṣūl al-Ḥikma* (a compilation of independent texts: *al-Uṣūl wa al-Ḍawābiṭ*, *Buḡyāt al-Mushtāq fī Ma'rifāt Wad' al-Anfāq*, *Sharḥ al-Barhātiyya al-Ma'rūf bi Sharḥ al-'Abd al-Qadīm*, *Sharḥ al-Juljulūtiyya al-Kubrā*), *Tartīb al-Da'awāt fī Takeḥṣīs al-Anqā 'ala Ikhtilāf al-Irādāt*. Besides the two former works, Gardiner adds three books he considers as al-

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in Arabic Script Used in the Pesantren Milieu," *Bijdragen toot de Taal-Land-en Volkenkunde* 146 (1990): 262.

<sup>10</sup>For further exploration on his life see A. Dietrich, "Būnī," *Encyclopedia of Islam*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 12, 156-7. Gardiner, "Forbidden Knowledge," 87. Francis, "Islamic Symbols," 97-112.

Būnī's core works: *Hidāya al-Qāṣidīn wa Nihāya al-Wāṣilīn*, *Mawāqif al-Gāyāt fī Asrār al-Riyādāt*, and *ʿIlm al-Hudā wa Asrār al-Ihtidāʾ fī Sharḥ Asmāʾ Allāh al-Ḥusnā*. His two other works are *al-Lumʾa al-Nūrāniyya fī Anwād al-Rabbāniyya*; and *Qabs al-Iqtidāʾ ilā Wafq al-Saʾāda wa Najm al-Ihtidāʾ*.<sup>11</sup>

### The Science of Letters Before and in the Time of al-Būnī

The science of the letters<sup>12</sup> deals with the special properties of letters. One development of this science is "combining letters to obtain particular properties or splitting letters (especially from Qurʾanic parts) into complex structures based on numerical, alchemical and astrological factors for a certain purpose and result."<sup>13</sup> This science includes alchemy, astrology, and arithmetics; the latter was a prestigious knowledge in the ancient world. Noah Gardiner's reference to the magical use of the letters as "occult-scientific" materials is highly reliable, then.<sup>14</sup> Ibn Khaldūn even praises the maker of talismans since he bases his work on "scientific principles or orderly norms."<sup>15</sup> Thus, while during its time, this science was perceived as a form of

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<sup>11</sup>Francis, "Islamic Symbols," 112-9. Gardiner, "Forbidden Knowledge," 96; Jan Just Witkam, "Gazing at the Sun: Remarks on the Egyptian Magician al-Būnī and His Work," *O ye Gentlemen: Arabic Studies on Science and Literary Culture In Honour of Remke Kruk*: (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2007), 183.

<sup>12</sup>This science is closely related to *simiyāʾ*, *jafr*, *tilsam*, *jadwal* and *wafq*. See, D.B. MacDonald, "Simiyāʾ," *Encyclopedia of Islam*: (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 9, 612-3. T. Fahd, "Djafr," *ibid.*: 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 2, 375-7. J. and B. Cabra de Faux Ruska, "Tilsam," *ibid.*: (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 10, 500-2. E. Graefe, and D.B. Macdonald [M. Plessner], "Djadwal," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*: (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 2, 370. J. Sesiano, "Wafk," *Encyclopedia of Islam*: (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 11, 28-31.

<sup>13</sup>T. Fahd, "Ḥurūf," *ibid.*: 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 3, 595-6. Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, 171-82.

<sup>14</sup>Gardiner frequently uses this term in his "Forbidden Knowledge?"

<sup>15</sup>While Ibn Khaldūn was generally an anti-occultist, he regarded *simiyāʾ*, the science of letters, as the only accepted magic. It is allowed, as it relies on the natural properties of letters and the names of God, and requires high mental and spiritual energy and purity. But he differs it from talismans. See Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, 171-8. Asatrian, "Ibn Khaldūn," 101.

"technology", nowadays, this science is seen as a mere superstition.

Kamal Pasha, in his *Sharḥ al-Miʿīn*, states that this science was practiced by Hermes,<sup>16</sup> Plato, Pythagoras,<sup>17</sup> Thales and Archimedes, and even Aristotle.<sup>18</sup> In addition, its principles are common in the Semitic traditions. This trend is particularly found in Hebrew Kabbala, an ancient Jewish mystical tradition addressing the esoteric interpretation of the Old Testament, in which a correlation is drawn between letters and the created world.<sup>19</sup>

In Islamic tradition, this science was highly developed. This phenomenon was due to the veneration of and the inspiration from the Qur'an, due to the belief that the Qur'an in *al-Lawḥ al-Mahfūẓ* (The Preserved Tablet) was in Arabic script, and due to the reality that the Names of God are written in the Qur'an in Arabic.<sup>20</sup> The science of letters in Islamic tradition is rooted in early Shi'i esotericism on the metaphysical relationship between the letters and the created world.<sup>21</sup> Jābir bin Ḥayyān and Ikhwān al-Ṣafā, inspired by Shi'i esotericism, developed this science, and Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) continued their line. The relationship between the science of letters and the interpretation of the Qur'an, its isolated letters and the Names of God, is found in Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) and Ibn Masarra al-Jaballī (d. 319/931). In the later period, Ibn ʿArabī developed a lengthy discussion on this in his *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, as did al-Būnī in his works.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Hermes is also widely credited as the originator of Astrology. See Michot, "Ibn Taymiyya," 170.

<sup>17</sup>Pythagoras is noted especially for his idea on the production and order of cosmos. See Gril, "The Science of Letters," 130.

<sup>18</sup>His works are on *huruf* and arithmomancy. However, there is a possibility that this is a pseudo-Aristotelian work. See Fahd, *Ḥurūf*, 596.

<sup>19</sup>D.B. MacDonald, "Sīmiyā," *ibid.*: (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 9, 613. Chodkiewicz, "Introduction," 25.

<sup>20</sup>Gardiner, "Forbidden Knowledge," 131.131; Witkam, *Gazing at the Sun*, 185.

<sup>21</sup>Gril, "The Science of Letters," 135, 93.

<sup>22</sup>For a lengthy examination of this science, see Gril, "The Science of Letters," 123-47.

With regards to the magical application of the letters, it is reported that before al-Būnī, there were Maslama al-Majrītī (or pseudo-Majrītī, d. 398/1007) in his *Kitāb al-Gāya*, and Jābir ibn Ḥayyān in his *Treatise*, who wrote on how to make talisman.<sup>23</sup> Al-Būnī's works are known as the first to extensively use Islamic symbols in the occult-scientific materials,<sup>24</sup> since al-Majrītī's work is basically Neoplatonic or celestial magic and Jābir ibn Ḥayyān himself deals with mathematics.<sup>25</sup>

In the Magrīb, the homeland of al-Būnī, this science was popular since the time of Ibn Masarra al-Jabalī.<sup>26</sup> In addition, in the sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth centuries, the Mālikī-dominated Magrīb was home to many controversial Sufis and esoteric sciences.<sup>27</sup> Gril adds that, "...between Ibn Masarra and Ibn 'Arabī, Andalusia was probably never without a master in the science of letters."<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the use of magical materials was common at that time.

The previous sub-chapters have dealt with the science of letters and al-Būnī as one of its masters. The next section attempts to trace the principles of Islamic spirituality within his works in order to provide the balanced reading of al-Būnī.

### Aspects of Islamic Spirituality in al-Būnī's Works on the Science of Letters

For al-Būnī, the science of letters holds a prominent position among the sciences. In *Sharḥ al-Juljulūtiyya*, al-Būnī said that "*ilm al-ḥurūf* is the foundation of knowledge, the most praiseworthy science, which only a limited number of men can

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<sup>23</sup>Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, 180. In practice, the use of talismans and amulets was common from the time of the early Muslims. Ruska, *Tilsam*, 500-1. Some of the first magic in Islamic literature was also found in Ikhwān al-Ṣafā. See Francis, "Islamic Symbols," 130.

<sup>24</sup>Francis, "Islamic Symbols," 241.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 85-8.

<sup>26</sup>Gril, "The Science of Letters," 140-1.

<sup>27</sup>Besides Ibn 'Arabī and al-Būnī, those Sufis are Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ḥarallī (d. 638/1240), Abū al-Ḥasan al-Sādhilī (d. 656/1258), and Ibn Sab'īn (d. 668-9/1269-71). See Gardiner, "Forbidden Knowledge," 87-8.

<sup>28</sup>Gril, "The Science of Letters," 140-1.

attain” for he concludes that everything has a name and each name whether divine or profane is made of letters.<sup>29</sup>

This science permeates all of al-Būnī’s books in various degrees. For example, among his many books mentioned above, the instructions for using and making talismans are found in *Shams al-Ma’ārif*,<sup>30</sup> *Kitāb Laṭā’if al-Ishārāt*,<sup>31</sup> *Tartīb al-Da’awāt* and *Qabs al-Iqtidā’*.<sup>32</sup> Despite the use of letters for magical purposes, there are some aspects of Islamic spirituality in al-Būnī’s science of letters that can be traced to the centrality of God and Sufi rituals prominent in his books. Furthermore, in other books, al-Būnī explores the Arabic letters using a Ṣūfī approach, which is discussed in the last part of this section. Exploring this spiritual aspect in al-Būnī’s works on the science of letters unveils his other dimensions, which have been neglected due to his popularity as the master of Islamic magic.

First, God plays a central role in his magical works. First of all, without dismissing the fact that this science was developing during his lifetime and that he was somewhat influenced by previous traditions, al-Būnī states that he gained the knowledge from divine inspiration, not reasoning. Furthermore, he maintains that it is the science of the saints.<sup>33</sup> In the introduction to *Shams al-Ma’ārif*, he clearly states that “one of my goals is to reveal God’s secrets particularly those of His Names with the

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<sup>29</sup>Francis, "Islamic Symbols," 134.

<sup>30</sup>This is a work with forty chapters. It starts with an elaboration of letters and their relation to various metaphysical/cosmological entities, such as the planetary spheres and the four elements. Many chapters focus on Arabic letters, the Names of God and Qur’anic passages. There are also sections on the spirits, *jafr*, *ẓa’irja*, and *simiyā’*.

<sup>31</sup>This work is more systematically structured than *Shams al-Ma’ārif*. It includes a discussion of the cosmological and metaphysical properties of Arabic letters and elaboration on certain talismans for different purposes. It includes also the Ṣūfī rituals or practices. Gardiner, "Forbidden Knowledge," 105.

<sup>32</sup>*Tartīb al-Da’awāt* is the most magical of al-Būnī’s works. Gardiner regards the last two books as doubtful to be al-Būnī’s original works. Ibid., 89. Note that the purposes of talismans were restricted to defensive, rather than offensive, ones. See Francis, "Islamic Symbols," 4.

<sup>33</sup>Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, 174.



hope that the reader could pray by them and get closer to God, eventually uniting with Him.”<sup>34</sup>

Second, it is the Names of God which are the main content of his occult-scientific materials. These are his focus besides some Qur’anic passages, either in the form of letters or its numeric values.<sup>35</sup> For example, a magic square made from the name *al-Bā’ith* (the Raiser of the dead) has great power to heal illness. Also, *al-Khāliq* (the Creator) and *al-Muhyī* (the Life-Giver) inscribed in a lead tablet and carried by a pregnant woman will prevent miscarriage. Furthermore, the Names of God are utilized in verbal forms, such as in the remembrance of God (*dhikr*) and invocation (*duʿāʾ*). For example, repeating *al-ʿAlīm* can be used to recover special knowledge.<sup>36</sup>

Third, the instructions of certain talismanic formulae are frequently followed by the order to perform certain Sufi devotions. Besides using *dhikr* and *duʿāʾ* as mentioned above, al-Būnī instructs the user to perform *khalwa* or *riyāda* (solitary retreat) as practiced by ascetics; this includes fasting in various degrees, giving alms and taking spiritual retreats.<sup>37</sup> In the end, he frequently concludes those instructions by citing the phrase *bi idhn Allāh* (“by the Grace of God, [this will work]”), emphasizing that all the prayers are submitted to God’s will.<sup>38</sup> In fact, in the introduction to *Shams al-Maʿārif*, he suggests that the user purify his intention and strengthen the conviction of his

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<sup>34</sup>Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī al-Būnī, *Shams al-Maʿārif* (n.d.), 2. Francis, "Islamic Symbols," 8.

<sup>35</sup>The Qur’anic passages used in his magical applications are the isolated letters, the *basmala*, āya al-Kursī, sūra Yāsīn and al-Fātiḥa.

<sup>36</sup>Francis, "Islamic Symbols," 210. Besides the Names of God, Names of Angel are also used in al-Būnī’s talismanic formulae and *dhikr*.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 121.

<sup>38</sup>See Edgar Walter Francis, "Mapping the Boundaries between Magic and Mysticism: The Names of God in the Writings of Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī al-Būnī" (paper presented at the Middle East Studies Association Conference, Alaska2003), 7. The phrase is from Q. 2:102.

prayer through this talismanic uses. Finally, he emphasizes that God is the One to whom we pray.<sup>39</sup>

Al-Būnī's science of letters is anchored in Neoplatonic cosmological/metaphysical speculations, with regards to the relation between the letters and the universe. This approach also figured in the thought of other Muslim scholars who discussed the science of letters, such as Ibn 'Arabī. In *Kitāb Latā'if al-Ishārāt*, he states that "God created the world through the secret of the letters. He also planted great power and wisdom in them, including His Greatest Names, His Speech and Afterlife."<sup>40</sup> Through emanationist theory, al-Būnī explores the special properties (*khawāṣṣ*) of Arabic letters in the structure of the world and humans.<sup>41</sup> Based on this comprehension, the use of the letters on talismans is in part intended as an aid in gaining supra-rational understandings of the reality of the cosmos.<sup>42</sup> It shows that, to some extent, his idea that letters contain secret benefits and supplication is deeply inspired by the broader sense of *tawḥīd* as understood in gnosticism. From this understanding, it can be said that so long as God is acknowledged as the central source of the transformative power of the occult-scientific materials, we can say that the letters inscribed, which refer to the Names of God, are only the tools to perform *dhikr* or *du'ā'*, or are the written form of *dhikr* or *du'ā'* that are usually recited verbally.

The principles of Islamic spirituality are further illuminated in some of his other works. Based on his research on al-Būnī's

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<sup>39</sup>al-Būnī, *Shams al-Ma'ārif*, 2. 2. He cites some hadiths and Qur'anic verses regarding the suggestion to pray to God, since He will answer the prayers of His servants.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Būnī, *Kitāb Latā'if al-Ishārāt* in Francis, "Islamic Symbols," 135.

<sup>41</sup> To al-Būnī each letters have servants (*khubdām*) which are Angels or spirits (*rūḥānīyyāt*). It is discussed in chapter 38 and 40 of *Shams al-Ma'ārif*. In addition, the letters can be refer to the numbers, verses of the Qur'an, the Names of God (e.g. *dal* refers to *al-Wadūd*), our body, natural world (elements, qualities, humors, seasons, directions, stations of the moon, planets. See *ibid.*, 145.

<sup>42</sup> Further exploration on this topic, including the intersection of his idea with that of Ibn 'Arabī, see the first part of his *Latā'if al-Ishārāt* or as summarized by Gardiner, "Forbidden Knowledge," 105.

other nonpopular works, Gardiner noted that in *Hidāya al-Qāṣidīn*, *Mawāqif al-Gāyāt* and *ʿIlm al-Hudā*, al-Būnī deals to a greater extent with subjects commonly found in Sufi literature. These books lack practically occult-scientific materials, i.e., Sufi theories and practices. *ʿIlm al-Hudā* is devoted to the discussion of the ninety-nine Names of God, with each section focused on a single name and each name signing an individual station in spiritual progress. *Hidāya al-Qāṣidīn* discusses the stages of spiritual endeavor, i.e., *sālikūn* (seekers), *murīdūn* (adherents) and *ʿarifūn* (gnostics). In *Mawāqif*, al-Būnī deals with the practices of ritual seclusion (*khalwa*), and discusses metaphysics/cosmology, the invisible hierarchy of the saints, and the natures of such virtual actors as angels, devils, and *jinn*s. In these works, many respectable Sufis from Ibrāhīm bin Adham, Maʿrūf al-Karkhī, Junayd al-Baghdādī, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī and ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī to Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī, Dhun al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, Abu Bakr al-Shiblī and al-Ḥallāj are cited.<sup>43</sup> Compared to al-Būnī's earlier books containing magical materials, which are widely copied, these books are often ignored or disregarded. This fact has led al-Būnī to be known as a magician rather than a Sufi.

A recent study on the life of al-Būnī also provides insight into his activity as a Sufi Shaykh. From the information presented in the authorial colophon in the manuscripts of his two books on this science, *ʿIlm al-Hudā* and *Laṭāʾif al-Ishārāt*, we find that these two books were auditioned (*samāʾ*) in Qarāfa al-Kabīra cemetery, Egypt, in 622/1225. This report is considerable for assessing his status among Egyptian Sufis, as Qarāfa cemetery was an important place for Sufi gatherings at that time. In one of the manuscripts, as Gardiner has noted, it is stated that, "This man is said to be famous among Muslims not only for his teaching, but also for his piety, and his tomb is visited for the sake of religion. Commonly, they called him Shaykh al-Būnī."<sup>44</sup> In another manuscript, we find another generous appraisal of him: "I swear by God that his utterances are like pearls or Egyptian gold. They are treasures the mystery of which is a blessed talisman for one who has deciphered

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 98-9.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 90-2.

[them] and who understands.”<sup>45</sup> These reports point to the other side of al-Būnī in terms of his capacity as a respected Sufi, a profile that has been obscured by the label of notorious magician that has become attached to his name.

## Conclusion

From the examination of al-Būnī’s science of letters, we can see that Islamic spirituality underlies his works on it. In his magical applications of the letters, the spiritual dimensions are found in the centrality of God: here God becomes the content of the magical materials and the only source of transformative power, and in sober Sufi devotions such as *dhikr* and fasting, as the complement of the magical materials. This magical uses of letters also comes from the cosmological and metaphysical understanding of the relation between the letters and the universe, in which the universe itself is the “emanation” of God. In his other books on this science, al-Būnī explores the Arabic letters primarily from an Islamic spirituality approach. Furthermore, reports on his life shows that he was a respectable Sufi at that time. The study on the spiritual aspects of al-Būnī’s science of the letters results in a more holistic portrait of his thought, both as a magician and a Sufi.

His magical applications of the science of Arabic letters was actually the result of the dialogue between magical practice common in that era, especially Neoplatonic or celestial magic, and the Islamic tradition. In this case, aspects of Islamic spirituality mentioned above became al-Būnī’s tools to reconcile both. In addition to that, al-Būnī avoided the use of magic for harm and focused on its protection purposes. Finally, magical applications of the Arabic letters was a unique and contextual expression on how al-Būnī built the relationship of humans, God and the universe and provided practical Sufism for the masses.

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 94.

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