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	TITLE OF THE RESEARCH ARTICLE  The scholar Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Wansharisi (d. 914 AH/1508 CE) and his role in cultural life in Islamic Morocco during the ninth century AH/15th century CE
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Abstract	
Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Wansharisi was a significant figure in the 9th century AH/15th century CE, earning him the title of standard-bearer of the Maliki school of thought in the Islamic Maghreb during this period. His profound interest in and expertise of Maliki jurisprudence, including its branches and foundations, is evident in his extensive legal work, Al-Mi'yar. Containing numerous legal rulings and issues alongside foundational principles, this work allowed later scholars to benefit from the knowledge of their predecessors. Sheikh Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Wansharisi is considered one of the most prominent figures of the ninth century AH/15 CE. This earned him the title of standard-bearer of the Maliki school in Islamic Morocco during this period. His profound interest in Maliki jurisprudence, encompassing its various branches and underlying principles, is evident in his extensive legal encyclopaedia, Al-Mi'yar, which contains a wealth of legal rulings and issues alongside foundational principles. Furthermore, al-Wansharisi's interests extended beyond jurisprudence to include other religious sciences such as theology, monotheism and hadith studies. In the field of language, he was a leading figure in grammar and rhetoric; it was said that even Sibawayh would have learned grammar from him.	
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Introduction:

This raises the question: What was the role of the scholar al-Wansharisi in the intellectual life of Islamic Morocco?

Introduction to Imam al-Wansharisi

Identity and lineage of al-Wansharisi:

He was the scholar Ahmad ibn Yahya ibn Abdul Wahid al-Wansharisi. Biographical dictionaries bestow upon Imam al-Wansharisi a number of titles befitting his status among the scholars of his time. For example, Ahmad ibn Manjour described him in his *Fihrist* as ‘the great jurist, the memoriser, the compiler of legal rulings, Abu Abbas Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Wansharisi’¹.

Al-Tanbukti also characterised him as ‘the learned scholar, the standard-bearer of the school at the head of the ninth century’².

Ahmad Shafshawi remarked: ‘He is Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Wansharisi: the esteemed Imam; the learned scholar; the most distinguished compiler; the most complete and elevated jurist; the overflowing sea of knowledge; and the brilliant star – the proof of the Moroccans against the peoples of the regions and their pride, acknowledged by both the ignorant and the learned.’ Abu Abbas Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Wansharisi was, may Allah have mercy on him, one of the most prominent and well-established scholars and imams.³⁹

Al-Sharif ibn Abdullah al-Kattani described al-Wansharisi as ‘the overflowing sea and the shining star, the proof of the Moroccans against the peoples of the regions, and their pride, acknowledged by both the ignorant and the learned’. He was a great jurist, memoriser, famous scholar, exemplar, proof, fair-minded model and standard-bearer of the school at the head of the ninth century. He was also the imam of both Morocco and the East. His name was Abu Abbas Sidi Ahmad ibn Yahya ibn Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahid ibn Ali al-Wansharisi. He was of Tlemcen origin, raised in Fez, and is buried in the same city. He was deeply versed in the Maliki school and knowledgeable in both its principles and branches. His extensive reading, memorisation and mastery are evident to anyone who examines his responses and writings.’⁴⁰

His birth and upbringing

Ahmad ibn Yahya ibn Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahid ibn Ali, also known as Abu Abbas al-Wansharisi, hails from the Wansharis Mountains region in western Algeria⁵. Born in Tlemcen, he was educated there and later settled in Fez, where he died⁶.

Specialising in religious sciences and jurisprudence, al-Wansharisi was born around 834 AH/1428 CE⁷.

From this, we can conclude that al-Wansharisi originated from the Wansharis Mountains, near Tissemsilt, Guelma, Chlef, Ain Defla and Tiaret. He was raised in the manner typical of scholars of his time, and later moved with his family to Tlemcen – the capital of the Zayyanid state, a scientific hub hosting many prominent scholars, especially in religious sciences and jurisprudence – al-Wansharisi’s area of expertise. His journey to Tlemcen was motivated by a desire to deepen his knowledge, and it was there that he developed his scholarly character.

His exact date of birth is not definitively known, but we do know that he passed away in 914 AH, having lived for around 80 years. This suggests that he was born around 834 AH.

Al-Wansharisi’s esteemed status in his homeland was due to his knowledge, piety, clarity, strictness and courage. He was unafraid to speak the truth and refused to tolerate injustice or wrongdoing. This forthrightness led to tensions with the ruling authorities, who became displeased with his actions and ordered his arrest. They seized his property and plundered his home in the first month of 874 AH. Although his possessions were confiscated, he escaped and fled to Fez, where he settled and became a teacher at al-Qarawiyyin⁸.

His death

Al-Wansharisi died in 914 AH, the same year that the Spanish captured the city of Oran. He lived to the age of eighty, dying on Tuesday, 20 Safar⁹ (corresponding to 14 April 1505 CE)¹⁰.

The poet Al-Wadi'ashi lamented the death of the esteemed scholar known as Sheikh Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Wansharisi of Tlemcen, who was a resident of Fez and the author of Al-Mi'yar and other works.

“The city of Fez and the entire West were darkened

By the death of the jurist Ahmad al-Wansharisi.

The unmatched leader of the righteous,

An unparalleled expert in legal rulings.

His experience and well-guided insight

illuminated the way for scholars.’

He continues:

‘By God, there is no one in the West today who is like him.

Nor anyone who can match his enduring legacy.’

May the Most Merciful grant him the greatest mercy,

A flow of blessings upon his resting place, morning and evening.’

In another tribute, he wrote:

‘Is there today in the West a scholar like Ibn Yahya?

Capable of issuing rulings that bind the joints?

He knows the intricacies of jurisprudence.

His nobility shines through his knowledge.

If one seeks fairness, there is no one like him.

This illustrious figure whose virtues are undeniable.

When death arrives, patience and acceptance

are due for what fate has decreed, for this is the way of creation.

He also expressed his sorrow:

‘I saw the stars of religion weeping in sadness

For the loss of a scholar who was the axis of the highest ranks.

I asked, ‘Who is this?’ and they answered,

“It is al-Wansharisi, the leader of the jurists.”

We cried out, ‘Woe unto us! Woe unto us!’

Since he has departed, the world has darkened.’

May the Most Merciful grant him the greatest mercy,
surrounding his resting place with generosity and blessings.’

In a variation of his verse, he said:

‘I saw the stars weeping in sorrow

For the loss of one who was the axis of his time.

I asked, ‘Who is this?’ and they replied,

“It is al-Wansharisi, the unique one of his era.”

To him all authority and knowledge in jurisprudence culminated,
adorned with the beauty of his eloquence.

Since he left us, the entire universe has grown dark.

And the morning has turned into night due to his absence.

My condolences are for all of creation,
especially for those of learning who cherish his esteemed position.¹¹

His teachers:

Al-Wansharisi began his studies with his father before pursuing knowledge from various scholars in Tlemcen. Among his notable teachers were:

- the eminent Imam Abu Abdullah ibn Abbas
- the jurist Abu Salem al-Aqbani
- Abu Abdullah Muhammad al-Aqbani¹²
- the blind preacher Imam Ibn Marzouk.
- Sheikh al-Ghurabli
- Imam al-Mari¹³

Sheikh Abu al-Fadl Sidi Qasim ibn Said al-Aqbani

- Abu Abdullah Muhammad al-Habbak, the jurist, commentator and preacher in Tlemcen (d. 871 AH)¹⁴.
- Sheikh Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Qasim al-Quri, the mufti in Fez (d. 872 AH)¹⁵.
- Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Jallab, the scholar and memorizer (d. 875 AH)¹⁶.
- The judge of Mazouna and virtuous jurist, Abu Zakariya Yahya ibn Musa ibn Isa al-Mughili (d. 883 AH)¹⁷.

- The jurist, scholar of principles and preacher, Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Harzuzah (d. 883 AH)¹⁸.

- Ahmad ibn Zakariyya (d. 899 AH)¹⁹.

His students:

Many scholars and students of knowledge learnt from al-Wansharisi, including his son, Abdul Wahid²⁰; the jurist, Abu Abbad ibn Milih al-Lamti, who studied under Ibn al-Hajib; Sheikh, Abu Zakariya al-Susi; the jurist and hadith scholar, Muhammad ibn Abdul Jabbar al-Wartadghiri; the jurist, Abdul Samih al-Samudi; Muhammad ibn Ghardis al-Taghlibi, the new judge of Fez²¹; and Sheikh, Abdul Warith al-Yasloty, from whom al-Wansharisi learnt jurisprudential sciences, among other subjects²³.

Al-Wansharisi's extensive knowledge, vast experience and long life — he lived to the age of eighty — contributed to the cultivation of this distinguished group of scholars. He passed away in the city of Fez on Tuesday, 914 AH²⁴.

His companions and peers:

Among al-Wansharisi's companions were:

- The jurist and judge Abu Zakariya Yahya ibn Abdullah ibn Abi al-Barakat (d. 910 AH)²⁵;

- The jurist and poet Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Abdul Rahman al-Hawdi (d. 914 AH)²⁶;

- The jurist and scholar of principles, Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Abi Yahya ibn Abi al-Ayish al-Khazraji (d. 911 AH);

- The mathematician and jurist, Abu Imran Musa ibn Ali al-Aghsaoui (d. 911 AH)²⁷;

- The jurist and preacher, Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Qasim al-Zuqaq (d. 912 AH)²⁸.

- Abu Abdullah Muhammad al-Karasi al-Andalusi, a judge who met with the scholars of Fez, including al-Wansharisi²⁹.

The era of al-Wansharisi:

Al-Wansharisi lived most of his life during the ninth century AH/15th century CE, a period marked by significant political instability in the Zayyanid state. Sultan Abu Abbas Ahmad al-Aqil came to power in 834 AH/1431 CE, but his nephew Muhammad al-Mutawakkil deposed him in 866 AH/1462 CE. Abu Abbas attempted to reclaim his throne, but was defeated and killed in 867 AH/1463 CE.

Seeking revenge for Abu Abbas's death, Prince Muhammad al-Ghalib established himself in Oujda before moving with his followers to the Beni Wrenid Mountains overlooking Tlemcen. There, he met his end in 868 AH/1464 CE during an ambush by al-Mutawakkil, who ordered that his body be buried after his head had been displayed in a yellow copper basin.

Al-Mutawakkil passed away in 879 AH/1475 CE and was succeeded by Muhammad al-Thabiti, who ruled for thirty years until his death in 911 AH/1505 CE. Historical records concerning the Zayyanid princes note this period of governance. Confrontations between the Spanish and the Zayyanids caused the authority of the Zayyanid dynasty to wane, resulting in the decline of their once-flourishing capital and the eventual transition to Ottoman rule³⁰.

Cultural Conditions

In the ninth century AH/15th century CE, the Islamic Maghreb experienced a significant cultural movement characterised by intense scholarly activity. During this period, the scholar al-Qalasadi visited Tlemcen and provided an accurate depiction of the cultural situation, stating:

“I encountered many scholars, righteous individuals, worshippers and ascetics in Tlemcen. The market of knowledge was thriving, and the pursuit of learning was a profitable endeavour, with high aspirations for its attainment and a strong commitment to diligence and effort.”³¹

Scholars focused their attention on religious sciences, particularly jurisprudence, and dedicated a number of books to explaining, commenting on and summarising these subjects for use in their teaching circles. They also showed interest in the writings of Sufi authors and compiled fatwas from their predecessors and contemporaries. This inclination towards summaries and commentaries was not limited to jurisprudence, but extended to other religious sciences as well³².

From this, we can conclude that the cultural atmosphere in Tlemcen during the ninth century AH exhibited several characteristics.

- A multitude of jurists and scholars emerged in Zayyanid Tlemcen, with biographical dictionaries and indexes filled with their names.
- Scholars of Tlemcen prioritised religious sciences over rational sciences. These religious sciences were characterised by commentaries and summaries of renowned texts such as the *Mukhtasar* of Khalil and the *Alfiyyah* of Ibn Malik, suggesting a dearth of original innovations and studies. While some scholars, including the esteemed al-Wansharisi, incorporated legal principles into works such as *Al-Mi'yar*, creativity in religious sciences was generally limited³³.
- The ninth century AH/15th century CE also saw the strong emergence of Sufism, driven by both internal and external circumstances, which gave rise to popular Sufism.

Scientific Activity of al-Wansharisi

Al-Wansharisi's scholarly status among his contemporaries:

He was highly regarded by the scholars of his time. Ahmad Baba al-Tanbukti noted his status, stating:

“The learned scholar, the standard-bearer of the school at the head of the ninth century” (*Nail al-Ibtihaj*, p. 136). (Nail al-Ibtihaj, p. 136).

Similarly, Ahmad ibn Manjour described him in his *Fihrist* as ‘the great jurist, the memoriser, the compiler of legal rulings, Abu Abbas Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Wansharisi’³⁴.

In a letter addressed to the esteemed scholars of Fez and Tlemcen, Sheikh Imam Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn al-Ghazi, titled *Al-Isharat al-Hassan*, he referred to al-Wansharisi as:

“The distinguished jurist, the learned and verified teacher, the eminent mufti, the significant authority, the most complete and notable Abu Abbas Sidi Ahmad ibn Sidi Yahya al-Wansharisi...”³⁵

Ibn al-Ghazi also remarked to the jurists around him:

‘If a man swore by the divorce of his wife that Abu Abbas al-Wansharisi encompassed the Maliki school in its principles and branches, he would be truthful in his oath and his wife would not be divorced, given al-Wansharisi’s

vast knowledge, extensive reading and memorisation, and mastery.' Anyone who examines his responses and writings can attest to this.³⁶

The poet al-Wadi'ashi lamented the passing of the scholar and protector of Islam, Sidi Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Wansharisi, expressing his high status with the following lines:

'The city of Fez and the entire West were darkened

By the death of the jurist Ahmad al-Wansharisi.

The unmatched leader of the righteous,

An unparalleled expert in legal rulings.³⁷

Al-Maqri also referred to al-Wansharisi as 'the protector of Islam', further underscoring the profound impact and respected position he held within the scholarly community³⁸.

The Status of al-Wansharisi Among His Contemporaries

From the preceding discussion, it is evident that al-Wansharisi held a significant position among the scholars of his time. He was truly one of the greatest scholars in Islamic Morocco, and specifically within the Zayyanid state.

His Scientific Activity

Al-Wansharisi is known to have moved to Fez in 874 AH. According to Ahmad ibn Manjour's **Fihrist**, he devoted himself to teaching the **Al-Mudawwana** and the branches of Ibn al-Hajib. He frequently lectured at the Al-Mu'alliq mosque in the Qarawiyyin area, close to the prison where he lived. His son, who later became a scholar himself, lived there for a long time until he built his own house in the Blue Quarter.

Although al-Wansharisi engaged with various fields of knowledge, he primarily focused on teaching jurisprudence. Those who did not know him said that he was only acquainted with that subject, yet he was eloquent in speech and writing. Some of his students remarked that Sibawayh would have learned grammar from him if he had been present³⁹.

Students flocked to al-Wansharisi, and his reputation spread among the general public and scholars alike thanks to his piety, good character, vast knowledge and eloquence⁴⁰.

One day at the Qarawiyyin Mosque, Sheikh Ibn al-Ghazi remarked to the jurists around him:

"If a man swore by the divorce of his wife that Abu Abbas al-Wansharisi encompassed the Maliki school in its principles and branches, his oath would be truthful, and his wife would not be divorced, given al-Wansharisi's vast knowledge, extensive reading, memorisation, and mastery. Anyone who examines his responses and writings can attest to this."⁴¹

Al-Wansharisi's scholarly activity extended beyond teaching to include issuing fatwas and engaging in academic correspondence. One such correspondence was a letter from the scholar Muhammad ibn al-Ghazali titled *Al-Isharat al-Hassan al-Marfou'a ila Hibr Fez wa Tlemcen*, in which he addressed al-Wansharisi as follows:

'The distinguished jurist, the learned and verified teacher, the eminent mufti, the significant authority, the most complete and notable Abu Abbas Sidi Ahmad ibn Sidi Yahya al-Wansharisi...'

In the letter, Ibn al-Ghazi discussed various scholarly issues, further showcasing al-Wansharisi's esteemed standing in the academic community⁴².

Scientific contributions of al-Wansharisi

Al-Wansharisi left behind a significant body of work, particularly in the fields of jurisprudence and Arabic language studies, as well as in the principles of jurisprudence. As Shafshawi noted, he was renowned for his systematic approach to scholarship.

"Several people told me that all his books were written on loose sheets and that he had a place he would always go to with a donkey to carry the pages, usually two or three sheets, from each book. Upon entering the space, he would remove his outer garments, leaving only a woollen garment secured with a leather strap and exposing his bald head. He would arrange the pages in two lines, carrying an ink pot in his belt and holding a pen in one hand and paper in the other as he walked between the rows, writing down excerpts from each sheet. Once he had finished compiling the material on the issue in question, he would make notes on acceptance or rejection."⁴³

Among his most notable works are:

- Al-Mi'yar al-Mu'rab: This comprehensive legal encyclopedia is considered the largest jurisprudential work in Islamic Morocco. Edited by a group of scholars under the supervision of Dr Muhammad Haji, it consists of 12 volumes, plus a 13th volume of indexes. Al-Wansharisi utilised the library of Sheikh Muhammad ibn Ghardis al-Taghlibi, which contained various texts that aided him in compiling his work, especially the fatwas from Fez and al-Andalus⁴⁴. For fatwas from Africa and Tlemcen, he relied on the Nawazil of al-Barzali and al-Mazuni, the original manuscript of which spans six volumes⁴⁵.

Commentary on Ibn al-Hajib's Al-Fara'i: This work is divided into three volumes, and al-Tanbukti noted that he had seen some of them⁴⁶.

- Ghinat al-Mu'asir wa al-Tali: A commentary on the documents of al-Fishtali, published by a group of scholars under the supervision of Dr Muhammad Subhi⁴⁷.

- The Principles of Jurisprudence: A concise work.

- The Superior in Document Regulations: This work was left incomplete.

- The Differences in Jurisprudential Issues: Also left incomplete⁴⁸.

- Clarification of the Paths in the Principles of the Maliki School: A significant work on Maliki jurisprudence⁴⁹.

Illumination of the Path: A brief treatise responding to those who issued rulings on the liability of a shared shepherd⁵⁰.

- 'The Positions in Islamic Government Offices and Legal Plans': Accompanied by a French translation⁵¹.

He also produced several summaries, including a brief work on the rulings of al-Barzali with commentaries and annotations⁵².

- 'The Necessary Purpose in Understanding the Terminology of Ibn al-Hajib'⁵³.

- The Deaths: Known as the 'Deaths of al-Wansharisi'⁵⁴.

From the above, it is clear that Sheikh Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Wansharisi played a crucial role in Moroccan intellectual life during the ninth century AH/15 CE. His prolific scholarly activity established him as a leading authority in Maliki jurisprudence, as evidenced by his major work *Al-Mi'yar*. This work was not merely a compilation of legal rulings, but also included explanations and commentaries, as well as al-Wansharisi's own legal reasoning. He was also well-versed in other sciences, such as the principles of jurisprudence and grammar, and taught language sciences, especially jurisprudence. He showed a keen interest in hadith studies, too. He also held the position of mufti.

Ethical Considerations

Only publicly available comments were analysed. Usernames and identifiable information were not recorded. The study followed digital ethics guidelines to protect individuals from harm and ensure data confidentiality.

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