



Al-Khawaja Yanni (Yanni the Westerner): An Example of Muslim-Christian Tolerance in Jeddah during the 20th Century

Hassna Al-Ghamdi

King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, KSA

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Abstract

This paper handles a unique example of religious tolerance and Christian-Muslim coexistence in one of the most conservative Islamic societies; the Saudi Arabian society, by going through the story of Khawaja Yeni, the Greek merchant who lived in the city of Jeddah in the middle of the twentieth century, integrated with its people, formed extensive relations with its Muslim people, and was able to remain vivid in the collective memory of its inhabitants despite his death has Christian decades ago. The Yeni model represents a model of mutual understanding and coexistence between Islamic and Christian cultures. It would not have mattered if the story had been in another Islamic country, but it was in Saudi Arabia and in the city of Jeddah, which is part of the emirate of Mecca, the holy capital of Muslims, this has made the story of Yeni eye-catching and intriguing. Therefore, I saw fit to give that subject a special care and a thorough inquest in order to capture the details of the social, cultural and religious life experienced and interacted with by this Greek merchant. In the absence of official documentation of the details of public life in the mid-20th century, the stories and news about Yeni remained only circulating amongst the inhabitants of Jeddah, and were not written or collected in an academic research that would have saved them from loss and made them available for specialists to study and analyze. Therefore, I relied on the method of "oral history's documentation" and I gathered these narratives from the mouths of the men who lived and worked with Yeni. Then I analyzed these narratives and drafted them in an academic form that brings together all the narratives from popular circles about the personality of this wonderful Christian who gave a wonderful example of coexistence and integration into a very conservative Islamic society.

Keywords: Al-Khawaja Yanni, Jeddah, Islam, Christianity, Tolerance

1. Introduction

Saudi society particularly the Hijazi community has great potential for fusion, based on principles of Islamic tolerance and rejection of racism, sectarianism, and tribalism. Among Saudi communities, the one in Jeddah is the most receptive to and welcoming of strangers. It has acquired these qualities thanks to its geographical and religious importance in the area and the world. These qualities are not a result of the effect of oil and its impact on the life of the people, but of the deep-rooted Islamic tolerance that calls for recognising others and granting them all rights, duties, and freedoms.

Jeddah City is full of examples that have lived on for extended periods and become part of its history. In the present example, we are going to shed light on one example of this, that of Yanni the Westerner, or Al-Khawaja Yanni. Being part of Jeddah's tolerant society, the significance of this character needs to be highlighted, especially in the present world that witnesses inappropriate stereotyping of Muslims and inaccurate representations of their history of coexistence with other peoples. Due to the scarcity of written materials relating to this character, I have relied on tales transmitted orally. I have had to seek reference from those who lived during his time or worked with

him in his business, although there were only a few of them; some of them had passed away, and the rest remembered little because they were young during the time Al-Khawaja Yanni lived in Jeddah. This is in addition to relying on what is written about him in a fleeting and repetitive manner by some authors of Jeddah history books.

Unrecorded oral history and popular sources are considered as an important source for recording the history of peoples, cities, and characters. Most Western countries, such as the UK and the USA, care about their oral tradition. This is why they allocate centres and libraries to collect, maintain, and make oral history available to researchers. The trend started to gain interest in the Arab world and the Gulf region in particular through the activities of the Centre for Heritage of the Gulf States in Doha, and the Popular History Unit in King Abdulaziz House in Riyadh. Thus, as a result of the interrelation between individual privacy and course of events, the personal experience and human dimension of history became of real value. Oral history has been able to close the gap between generations, and given meaning to elderly people when they relate valuable experiences. They no longer feel marginalised by the society.

We will start our narrative by giving an idea of the family of Al-Khawaja Yanni Khristo Dolo.

2. The Family of Al-Khawaja Yanni

Yanni Khristo Dolo's family dates back to the nineteenth century when his grandfather came to Jeddah in 1273Hijri/ 1857 for the first time to participate, along with a group of foreign businessmen and investors, in establishing a shipping company. However, the great Sedition of Jeddah (Diab, 2015) had erupted before he completed one year of his arrival in the city. On this subject, Ahmed Zaini Dahlan says, "the sedition that took place before he arrived in Jeddah from Dar Al-Salatanah (The House of Sultanate) after the death of his father took place on the 6th of Dhul Qa'dah in 74 Hijri". Briefly, the cause of the sedition was that Salih, a Jeddah merchant, had a boat that raised the English flag, which he wanted to replace by an Ottoman Empire flag. When the English consul heard that, he prohibited him from doing so, but Salih did not pay heed. He took a licence from Namiq Basha, who permitted him to raise the Ottoman flag, and gave him a written document. He installed and raised the flag, removing the English one. The English consul then mounted the said boat and removed the Ottoman flag that had been installed, and replaced it with the English flag. It was widely reported that when the English consul removed the Ottoman flag, he stepped on it and made inappropriate remarks. Muslims in Jeddah were very upset. As a result, they were agitated, and headed to the residence of the Consul and killed him, causing unrest, during which other Christian consuls in Jeddah were killed, and their money was taken. They also wanted to kill Faraj Yosr, a famous Jeddah merchant, because he defended the English consul, and was considered an English subject. He fled, and the public wanted to rob his house. However, Mr. Abdullah Al-Shareef, the representative of His Eminence Al-Shareef Mohamed bin Own in Jeddah, prevented them from doing so. Namiq Basha was in Mecca and Shareef Ali, the deputy in the Emirate, headed to Jeddah to meet the pilgrims. When Namiq Basha heard the news of this sedition, he was so concerned that he went to Jeddah and sought to dissipate the tension. He arrested some people who were accused of killing and robbery. He reported the details of this sedition to the Ottoman Empire. Afterwards, he went to Mecca for pilgrimage (Zaini Dahlan, 2011) This sedition resulted in the death of the English consul, the French consul and his wife, as well as twenty other Western diplomats and merchants (Al-Ansari, 1963) Others swam from the Bant port to the English Fleet *Scope*, which was close to the coast and bombarded Jeddah (Zaini Dahlan, 2011).

Among those who fled to the ship was the grandfather of Yanni, who remained hiding in the ship while it bombarded Jeddah, wrecking its houses and setting fire to roofs and roshans as revenge for the killing of the foreigners (Diab, 2015). When the sedition subsided, Yanni's grandfather returned to Jeddah to start an open bar that received customers until the Arab Revolt began and the bar was closed. Yanni's grandfather left Jeddah, leaving behind him his son Custand Yonious, who worked in the business of importing foodstuff from Greece to Jeddah, the business that was then inherited by his son, Al-Khawaja Yanni (Diab, 2015).

3. Al-Khawaja Yanni

His name was Yanni Khritso Dolo, an Orthodox Christian man of Greek origin, who started the first modern grocery in Jeddah, named by residents "Yanni Bank". He continued the business of importing foodstuff that he sold in his grocery, including different types of cheeses, dried fish, pastrami, and locally-made vinegar. His fame spread, and he became famous in the city as he established relations with prominent figures as well as with common people. He became as was said about him, "a Westerner with local and popular standards". He was an agent for a brand of olive oil named SASO in the Kingdom; this brand is still known today. He was also an agent for Damo Milk and the first to import these to Jeddah (Diab, 2011). However, Mohammed Raggam says in his book *Tales from the Good Time* that the grocery was established by Yanni's uncle and his father-in-law, who was the first to introduce the manufacturing of vinegar in Jeddah (Talal, 2013); it was then inherited by Yanni and his wife after the death of Eikiliya, who is buried in Jeddah. Yanni used to make and sell vinegar in bottles brought by the customers (Raggam, 2015). He was assisted in importing the goods by a Greek called Nigola and an Italian named Danadana, who used to bring to Yanni goods like Spanish olive oil and Kashkwan cheese (Sohaim, 2016). One of the boys, named Mohammed Ali Al-Ghilani, worked at the shop and used to clear the goods imported through the port (Al-Ghamdi, 2016). Three Hadrami boys assisted him (Diab, 2011). Banyouti, Yanni's nephew, had also worked with him, and later joined one of Abdulah Al-Faisal's electricity companies. Whenever he had a problem, he would approach Prince Abdullah to seek help (Al-Ghamdi, 2016).

There was a money exchanger named Ali Al-Amoudi, nicknamed "Ali Al-Tair" beside Yanni's shop. There was also another money exchanger named Salem Bamotahhar, who worked with his two sons, Hasan and Ali. There was also a man selling *chorek* and cheese called *buggash*. Al-Khawaja had a storeroom called Gaa'h or Hall on the northern side of Akkash's Mosque, where he kept his goods (Al-Ghamdi, 2016).

Al-Khawaja Yanni was good at carpentry; so he made the floors and shelves for the grocery in a skilful manner. On the top of the grocery, he built his private house, where he lived with his family that comprised his wife and his two daughters, Letsa and Georgina. He had one son named Andreco. For most of the year, his family lived in Egypt, which he loved very much, especially because a lot of Greeks were working there. Letsa was married to a Greek working in the United Agencies, and Georgina was probably studying in Sudan, as Al-Khawaja regularly received correspondence from Gordon College. His son used to play with children in the neighbourhood, but he may have left for Egypt. He also used to receive correspondence from Limassol and Famagusta in Cyprus. His banking transactions were made through Indochina Bank, which is nowadays the Saudi Hollandi Bank (Al-Ghamdi, 2016).

Recalling his memories with Al-Khawaja Yanni in his tale entitled *Al-Khawaja Yanni*, The writer Sadiq Diab says that Al-Khawaja was an elegant man who cared very much about his appearance, his hairstyle, and the cleanliness of his store and the way he treated his customers. He used to be very kind to his customers, especially children, to whom he used to give sweets. If he were not busy with his customers, he would sit and talk to the pupils who passed by to buy sweets, encouraging them to study and to realise their future dreams and become doctors, engineers, or scientists to participate in the development of the country he loved so much. He did not consider himself as a stranger, and the natives exchanged with him the same cordial feelings, thus becoming one of them. Him and his daughter, who used sometimes to help him at the shop when she was in Jeddah, became part of the population. Yanni lived as a Jeddah citizen, sharing with them their happiness and sorrow, and had perfected the Arabic dialect spoken in Jeddah (Alawi, 2015). He also spoke proper Arabic and used to repeat some Islamic phrases such as *la ilah illa Allah* (No God but Allah) and *ittagi Allah* (fear Allah). He used to donate money frequently, especially on Fridays, the equivalent of four piasters for each needy person. He used to contribute along with his fellow merchants, especially with respect to Al-Fallah School and used to eat the local food of Jeddah, such as beans. He loved to eat it at Abdulgadir Al-Amir's shop, which was close to the current Al-Mahmal Shopping Centre. He used to take coffee in the Turkish way, and they used to get their coffee from Al-Farougi shop in Prince Mansour Building. He used to drink tea

from the Awlad Al-Girsha coffee shop from Al-Houmran (Al-Ghamdi, 2016). All of these indicate that he was well-adjusted in the Jeddah community.

There are different stories as to why Yanni's grocery was named "Yanni Bank". Some say that the shop had a door called the bank. In fact, Yanni's grocery had three doors. One opened on the Gabil Street and two opened on Akkash's Mosque (Al-Ghamdi, 2016). It is also said that because of the abundance of goods at the grocery, it may have been nicknamed as a bank. He was the first to introduce Parmesan cheese and Al-Kalamata and Al-Alamba olives, which he used to bring from India and many other foodstuffs from many other countries (Sa-id, 2016). Some say that the reason for giving the grocery that name was because of a long bench (called the *bank* in Latin) used for cutting. All money exchangers put in front of them a bench named bank (Shalabi, 2016). It is said that Al-Khawaja conducted clearance business and that it is for this reason the grocery was given that name (Al-Hajri, 2016). It is known that he was always ready to assist any of his compatriots (Al-Ghamdi, 2016).

Al-Khawaja Yanni had a seating deck in Gabil Street in Harat Al-Bahr (Sea District) on the south side of the open market vault. It was one of the most famous and prominent seats in Jeddah in the last century of the Hijri calendar. The seat attracted many prominent figures and notables, most of important of whom was Shiekh Ali Eid, known as the Arab Khawaja, and the director of the Jeddah Port, whose relationship with Al-Khawaja was so strong that they became partners in business. It also attracted Shiekh Ibrahim Zahran, Shiekh Saleh Kayyal, Shiekh Abdulrahman Abu Aouf, Sheikh Hasan Samkary, Shiekh Ahmed Nazer, Shiekh Mustafa Zahran, Shiekh Ali Ashqar, Al-Khawaja Nicola, and Shiekh Abbas Al-Halawani. Sometimes Yanni's wife, Gairo, and his daughter also participated in the sessions (Raggam, 2015).

One aspect of peaceful coexistence with respect to Al-Khawaja Yanni and his family was that his daughter was not required to wear the *ibayah*, and she never did. Instead, she used to go to her father's shop dressed in a short coat and a skirt that barely covered half of her legs, covering part of her hair with a scarf (Diab, 2015).

In his story, Sadiq Diab portrays the wife of Al-Khawaja Yanni as one of the local women. She had strong ties with her neighbours. She used to sleep on the roof with her female neighbours during the hot seasons. She told bedtime stories to the young boys of her neighbours, who shared with them the roof. She used to celebrate with the neighbours when they completed learning the Koran or part of it by giving those gifts (Diab, 2015). It is said that whenever she returned from Alexandria, she would bring many gifts – including sweets, toys, and souvenirs – to distribute among neighbours, friends, and children (Al-Ghamdi, 2016).

Al-Khawaja Yanni was very popular and loved by everyone. They used to like his pranks, jokes, and tricks. He was good-hearted and kind and participated with them in every detail of their daily life. He respected their religion, and they reciprocated that respect. He used to fast during the entire month of Ramadan, and when he would start to break his fast, he would say, "O' Allah, I have fasted for You". He used to celebrate the Eid feasts, and he would insist on bringing the most expensive sweets and cakes as presents for the celebration of Eid (Al-Ghamdi, 2016). He would leave his shop or lock himself indoors until prayers were finished. He used to be the first to leave a sad event and the first to arrive at a happy one (Talat, 2012). He used to provide a supper consisting of cheese, sweets, and olives to Abu Kuhla, one of Jeddah's famous mentally ill persons (Diab, 2003).

He loved hunting. During the cooler seasons and at the time of the arrival of migrating birds, he used to go to Um Al-Salam on the outskirts of Jeddah with his shotgun, where he hunted birds, especially quails, which he would cook in a very special and outstanding way. He was known as an excellent cook, especially when cooking fish. He used to go to the fish market (Al-Bangalah) to buy the *harid* fish (Al-Ghailani, 2016).

He used to celebrate Christmas and New Year at the Embassy. He would bring home with him another cake to hold a small party and invite those who were close to him to celebrate in an atmosphere of love, intimacy, and friendship. With respect to Muslim feasts, he used to give his Muslim workers three days off and buy feast dresses for them (Al-Ghailani, 2016).

Al-Khawaja was rich; he would provide medical treatment to those working in his grocery, and bear all expenses. Among the famous physicians he used to refer his workers to for treatment were

Dr. Shiekh Al-Aydarous, Dr. Farajullah Waznah, and Dr. Abdulgadir Al-Turk. During the hot times when skin diseases would increase, he would treat his workers at the Sayrafi Dermatology Clinic and the Khalid Idris Hospital if the case required hospitalisation (Al-Ghailani, 2016).

Quoting Shiekh Hamid Abu Zinadah, who lived during the time of Al-Khawaja and “used to be one of his close friends”, Shiekh Abdul Wahab Abu Zinadah says in his book *A Jeddah Tale* that Al-Khawaja Yanni consulted Shiekh Hamid with respect to selling the grocery to a famous money exchanger on Gabil Street against SAR100,000, where the Westerner converted the amount to Greek drachma in Safar 1386 Hijri/1966. Shiekh Hamid tried to persuade him not to sell the grocery and reconsider the matter by reminding him of the advantage he and his shop enjoyed as well as the love of the people towards him and his family, but he insisted on finishing the sale and leaving. The attempts by his friend Shiekh Hasan Abu Al-Ainain, who was then a member of the board of directors of Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry, also failed to make him change his mind and stop the sale of the grocery and leave. Al-Khawaja left Jeddah, and no further news was received from him (Abduzinadah, 2003)(Adnan, 2016) .

However, Mr. Saleh Al-Ghilani, who worked with Al-Khawaja until 1391hijri/1971, tells us that the story of the sale of the grocery is untrue since the grocery was rented from Al-Ashraf on an annual contract basis. He offered to sell the grocery with three years’ rent paid in advance to The offer was thereafter accepted by Ba Rayyan, who changed the business to cloth trading(Al-Ghamdi, 2016).

This story is consistent with what narrated by Shiekh Sohaim Al-Ghamdi, a friend of Al-Khawaja Yanni, that he sold the goods in the grocery to the Hallawani Brothers, and that Ba Rayyan purchased the grocery and changed the business. The reason was Al-Khawaja’s advancing age; his health deteriorated, and he decided to go back to Greece since the Greeks were frequently harassed in Egypt after the Nasser Revolution. His family returned to Greece, and he decided to leave after the revolution resonated in the Kingdom (Al-Ghamdi, 2016).

Three years after his departure, having lost all the money he had owned, Al-Khawaja Yanni returned to Jeddah empty-handed. He went to Shiekh Hamid Abu Zinadah to explain to him the loneliness that he had suffered after he returned to his home country, and his continuous eagerness and nostalgia for Jeddah, and his desire to return to Jeddah and its old lanes and to live among its residents, hoping for a fresh start. However, it was not possible to start from where he had left off after he had lost the money that he had gained from his business and the sale of the grocery. He declined the offer given to him to supervise a store that had opened at the junction of Madina Road and Palestine Street. He refused to start as a wage earner and left without saying goodbye to anyone (Abduzinadah, 2003). Al-Ghilani says that he heard that Al-Khawaja had started a grocery in Al-Rewais district, and then there was no news of him (Al-Ghailani, 2016). However, Shiekh Sohaim, Al-Khawaja’s friend, said that Al-Khawaja came to him and requested a loan so as to start all over again. The merchants raised for him an unrepayable amount of SAR 30,000 as assistance. He took the money from Shiekh Al-Sohaim and promised to bring it back. He said goodbye with tears to Shiekh Al-Sohaim before leaving for Greece, where he died. He was buried in Greece, although he wanted to be buried the Christian cemetery in Jeddah, as per his will, which was narrated by his daughter Georgina, who continued her communication with the friends of her father until ten years ago, after which no news came from her(Al-Ghailani, 2016).

Mohammed Raggam narrates another story that is different from what Shiekh Hamid Abu Zinadah narrated. He says that one of the famous people buried in the Christian cemetery in Jeddah is a Greek merchant named Yanni Khristo Dolo, who had started a big grocery that carried the name of “Bank Al-Khawaja” (Al-Saggaf., 2016) His funeral took place from his house to the cemetery, accompanied by many cars that belonged to the consuls and distinguished persons in Jeddah(Maghribi, 1984). His funeral went from the main road until it arrived at Jeddah’s southern wall (Raggam,2015). However, it seems that Raggam is confused, as the person buried in the Christian cemetery was Ekelia and not Yanni, who died and was buried in Greece according to Shiekh Sohaim’s account, who quotes Yanni’s daughter, who told him about her father’s death in Greece (Al-Ghailani, 2016).

Thus the last chapter of Al-Khawaja Yanni’s story was closed, a character who has been part of the stories and tales of Jeddah.

4. Conclusion

In the above account, we have tried to shed the light on an important character in Jeddah's contemporary history. Al-Khawaja Yanni was an example of the individual's capability for peaceful coexistence in different societies. It is clear to us, without any unnecessary narcissism that the capacity of the Saudi society in general and the Hijazi society in particular for positive coexistence with others extends to principles as well as to real life, despite cultural, religious, and ethnic differences.

Al-Khawaja Yanni lived in Jeddah for a period extending tens of years. He became part of its business life and one of the famous merchants in the old market of Gabil, maintaining his religion, coexisting with Muslims, respecting them and their Islamic and Arab traditions and customs. At the same time, the Jeddah community regarded Al-Khawaja as part of the society and its coherent fabric and did not force him to embrace Islam. Nor did they forsake him; instead, they shared with him his happy moments and celebrations in a family atmosphere filled with love and affection to the extent that he became part of Jeddah's heritage, a symbol of its openness towards others and part of Jeddah's memory of wonderful tales and stories.

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