

Scholars and Mosques of Hilla in the Writings of Mahmoud Shukr Abu Khumra

Savants et mosquées de Hilla dans les écrits de Mahmoud Shukr Abu Khumra

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Abstract:

Those who do not know their history cannot understand their present reality or build their future! This becomes even more important when history is full of successes and contains the names of many innovators who illuminated the world and delivered it from ignorance to the light of science and knowledge. Today we researched an Iraqi figure from Hilla who won the hearts of the people and gained the love of the poor and helped them financially and morally. He is Professor Mahmoud Shukr Abu Khumra. He filled the libraries of Hilla with his books and writings, which gained wide fame. He addressed social, economic, political, and religious issues and spoke about what he saw of the landmarks, mosques, shrines, and tribes of Hilla, whether inside or outside Hilla, his city, through field study and drawing maps of the old neighborhoods of the city of Hilla.

Keywords: Mahmoud Abu Khumra ; Biography ; Works ; Writings ; Field writings

Résumé :

Ceux qui ne connaissent pas leur histoire ne peuvent comprendre leur réalité présente ni construire leur avenir ! Cela devient encore plus important quand l'histoire est remplie de succès et contient les noms de nombreux innovateurs qui ont éclairé le monde et l'ont délivré de l'ignorance. Aujourd'hui, nous avons étudié une figure irakienne de Hilla qui a gagné le cœur des gens : le professeur Mahmoud Shukr Abu Khumra. Il a enrichi les bibliothèques de Hilla de ses ouvrages traitant de questions sociales, économiques, politiques et religieuses, documentant les monuments, mosquées, sanctuaires et tribus.

Mots-clés : Mahmoud Abu Khumra ; Biographie ; Œuvres ; Écrits ; Écrits de terrain

1. Introduction

Professor Mahmoud Shukr Abu Khumra was born in 1916 in the Hilla (al-Kuwaykhat) district. His birth coincided with the entry of the Turkish commander Akif into Hilla, an event known in local historical memory as 'Akif's First Battle.' In 1920, he began his primary traditional studies in a traditional Quranic school (kuttab) under the supervision of the late Muhammad Naji. He then enrolled in the Teachers' Training College in Baghdad, and after graduating, he was appointed as a teacher in one of the Hashemite villages. In 1941, he was transferred to the Eastern School, and in 1952, he was appointed principal of the Euphrates Primary School, a position he held until 1963.

Mahmoud was a true model of education, teaching, and administration. He possessed remarkable philanthropic and moral qualities; he collected funds from wealthy citizens to distribute to needy students. He also organized mass circumcision ceremonies for students who needed social and medical assistance and personally visited students' homes to understand why they were struggling in certain academic subjects by speaking directly with their families.

He retired in 1966 at his own request and devoted his entire time to writing, research, and local heritage documentation. Among his most prominent published works are: 'Ali and His Sons from Cradle to Grave,' published in 1998; 'The Houses of Hilla as I Knew Them from the Beginning of the Fifties onwards,' published in 1993, which thoroughly discusses the families of Hilla, its old quarters, and the shrines of scholars; 'Lamps of Life' (1998); 'Treasures of the Past,' which includes collections of poetry by Hilla poets; and 'Glimpses from the History of the Judiciary in Hilla During the Ottoman Era,' published in 2000 AD.

The present study consists of two main topics developed by the researchers: First, his biography, life, family lineage, works, writings, and the personal testimonies and opinions of prominent scholarly figures in Hilla about him. Second, the detailed historical documentation of scholars, educational centers, traditional assemblies (diwans), and mosques in the fertile city of Hilla, as meticulously recorded in the original field writings of Abu Khumra.

2. Biography, Family, Works, and Scholarly Opinions

2.1 Biography and Family Lineage

His birth is linked to a historical event still remembered by the people of Hilla: the Akif bench. It was popular opinion in the city: 'If you want to know the tribes and neighborhoods of Hilla, go to Mahmoud Abu Khumra.' An expatriate from Hilla, suffering from severe homesickness and separation, was once asked what he wished for most in the world. He replied: 'I wish to sit on the banks of the Hilla river with Mahmoud Abu Khumra by my side.' He was the esteemed teacher and educator, Haj Mahmoud Shukr Mahmoud Abu Khumra al-Husseini, born in 1916 in the al-Kuwaikhat area. He studied in traditional Quranic schools under the late Muhammad Naji in 1920. He completed his formal studies at the Higher Teachers' Training College in Baghdad. After graduating, he was appointed as a teacher in one of the villages of al-Hashimiya. In 1941, he was transferred to Faisal II Elementary School in Hilla. He worked as a teacher and principal of the Euphrates School (also known as the Eastern School, now Sharif al-Radi School) from 1952 to 1962. He was married to a woman from the Al-Aloush family.

After his retirement in 1968, and as a result of his extensive social standing in the Hilla community, he turned to writing and collecting Hilla's heritage to serve as a primary source for researchers and authors, shedding light on one of the prominent figures of Hilla Al-Fayha.

He referred to his family lineage, stating that it is a family possessing pleasing characteristics among people, descended from a single ancestor who came from Baghdad more than three hundred years ago: Mr. Hussein bin Mr. Muhammad bin Mr. Ahmad ibn Sheikh Ali Abu Khumra. They originally settled in the Al-Taqa neighborhood on the riverbank, where an orchard existed and a house was constructed on part of it. After that, he married a local woman from the neighborhood, and over the years he had two sons: Jawad and Muhammad Ali. He was well-off financially and bought orchards in neighboring villages, including Al-Wardiya and Al-Kuwaykhat along the river. He was a pious, devout man who feared God and wore black/green cloth attire. Both his sons grew up and married. Afterwards, he traveled with his sons to perform the Hajj pilgrimage. Their return brought great joy to all who knew them. Subsequently, he made an agreement with some local families, including Al-Waqqaf, to build the first public bathhouse in Hilla to earn spiritual reward.

Mr. Hussein Al-Hajj Jawad had two sons, Ahmed and Mahmoud, both of whom passed away. Hajj Muhammad Ali had only one son, Hamad. Everyone else continued living in the ancestral house. Hajj Ahmad had sons named Ibrahim, Aboud, Alloush, Muhammad Jawad, Shaheeb, Jaber, Qasim, Muhammad Diaa, Mahmoud, Najib, Shukr, and Hayawi (the latter died during his father's lifetime). Shukr had sons named Matar, Hamid, Hussein, and Mahmoud. All members of this family, along with their wives and children, lived together in the house of their grandfather, Mr. Hussein, until national government developments occurred. Hajj Shukr bought land next to Al-Qazawna and built his house, adding an alley space called the shed, intended to shelter guards and passersby from harsh weather conditions, cold, and rain. He settled there alone as a cloth merchant, having inherited the business from his father, who was the head of the family in his thirties and performed the Hajj pilgrimage at the age of thirty-eight.

Hajj Shukr Mahmoud Abu Khumra had four sons: Matar, Hamid, Hussein, and Mahmoud. 'We lived and married in this house and were among the happiest people. Then we returned to the old house after repairing it until 1949. On Tuesday morning of that year, my father died.' He also noted the courageous national stances of his uncle, Hajj Hamad, in expelling foreign forces during historical conflicts.

2.2 Brothers and Children

Brothers: Mahmoud Shukr Abu Khumra mentioned that he had three brothers who worked actively in the local market as cloth merchants: Matar, Hamid, and Hussein.

Children: He fathered four sons and three daughters:

1. Luay (born in 1948 AD): Graduated from the University of Basra with an engineering degree.

2. Sa'ed (born in 1954 AD): Graduated in physics sciences and fathered a son named Osama.

3. Shaker (born in 1958 AD): An engineer, father of Al-Hassan.

4. Samer (born in 1960 AD): Graduated from the Petroleum Institute, father of three sons: Ahmed, Amir, and Hussein.

He also had three daughters: Suha (deceased), Bushra, and Manal.

2.3 Moral Stances, Educational Prestige, and Personal Anecdotes

1. Admission to Basra University Dormitories: Professor Luay Abu Khumra recalled: 'When I was accepted into the College of Engineering at Basra University, I went wearing a jacket and tie for my dormitory admission interview. One of the committee members advised me to remove my formal jacket and tie because the interview was intended for students from low-income families. When asked about my father's profession and salary, I answered that my father worked as a school teacher earning 50 dinars a month. A silent committee member listened attentively and then asked: Do you know that your father taught me when I was in the first grade?'

2. The Prestige of Education and Respect for Teachers: Professor Luay shared another incident: 'In my third year at Basra University, my father came to meet the Dean, Dr. Fouad. When my father entered the office, the Dean immediately stood up with immense warmth and respect, repeatedly calling him: Professor, Professor! The Dean refused to sit down and remained standing attentively beside my father throughout the entire meeting out of deep respect for his former teacher.'

3. Interaction at the Police College: During a visit to Baghdad to assist a student enrolling in the Police Academy, the head of the academy, Brigadier General Muhammad, received Mahmoud Abu Khumra with profound joy, exclaiming to those present: 'This is my teacher Mahmoud Abu Khumra from my primary school days!' He insisted on preparing a celebratory meal for him.

2.4 Comprehensive Survey of His Published and Unpublished Works

After retiring, Abu Khumra refused to remain inactive. He dedicated his retirement to documenting the architectural, social, and cultural heritage of Hilla:

1. 'Ali and His Sons from Cradle to Grave' (published in 1998 AD): Covers the complete biographical history of the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt.

2. 'The Houses of Hilla as I Knew Them Since the Early 1950s and Beyond' (published in 1993 AD): Examines the foundation of Hilla, ancient civilizations, old urban quarters (Al-Jami'een, Al-Taq, Jubran, Al-Mahdiyah, Al-Ta'ees, Al-Jabawiyeen), complete with hand-drawn spatial maps and tribal records.

3. 'Lamps of Life' (published in 1998 AD): Compiles moral teachings, wisdom, and historical reflections.

4. 'My Solitude' / 'Let Me Go' (written in 1994 AD): Documents his months of political detention under former regimes, clarifying that false accusations of political affiliations were refuted by his loyal students who affirmed his absolute dedication to education.

5. 'Treasures of the Past' and 'Glimpses from the History of the Judiciary in Hilla During the Ottoman Era' (published in 2000 AD): Preserves local poetry collections, judicial records, traditional markets, diwans, and private mosques.

6. 'The Wisdom of the Predecessors is Inherited by the Successors' (written in 1995 AD): Transcribed with the assistance of his daughter Manal, containing theatrical texts, historical memories, and moral guidance.

7. 'History of the Tribes That Settled Outside the City of Hilla' (written in 1995 AD): Documents rural tribal structures, irrigation networks surrounding Hilla, and photographs of tribal leaders.

8. 'Life' (written in 1998 AD): Includes moral insights, photographs, and historical biographies.

9. 'Snapshots from the History of the Judiciary in Hilla During the Ottoman Era' (2000 AD): His final completed research manuscript prior to his illness.

2.5 Social Initiatives: The Tradition of Mass Circumcision Ceremonies

Circumcision in traditional Iraqi culture served as a major rite of passage from childhood to manhood. Historically performed by traditional barbers using rudimentary tools, it evolved into a formal medical practice. Professor Abu Khumra held a unique place in Hilla's social history by organizing large-scale, free mass circumcision ceremonies for poor children.

He organized public announcements across Hilla's old quarters (Al-Jadeeda, Al-Jami'een, Al-Sharif Al-Radi). Benefactors provided financial support, while Abu Khumra supplied every child with new white traditional dishdashas, white socks, shoes, and undergarments. The summer vacation grounds of Al-Furat Primary School were transformed into a recovery facility fitted with medical beds. A grand festive procession accompanied by traditional drumming, chanting, and sweet distributions marched from the old bridge to the school. Between 150 and 200 children participated in each event. Volunteer medical personnel, including Dr. Yusuf Shams Ali from Najaf and medic Hadi Kamal al-Din, performed the procedures under rigorous sanitary

conditions. Children remained at the school for 3 to 4 days for recovery, receiving three complete daily meals personally supervised by Abu Khumra.

2.6 Testimonies of Scholars and Dignitaries

Dr. Abbas Ibrahim Hammadi Al-Jubouri (Dean of the Teachers' College, University of Babylon) reviewed his manuscript 'The Legacy of the Predecessors' on August 23, 1995, praising its extensive scholarly rigor, accurate tracking, and immense value for future generations of Arab and Muslim youth.

Sabah Saheb Alloush (1995) noted that Abu Khumra's writings offered a faithful restoration of traditional customs, corrected historical errors, and provided an invaluable summary of social ethics based on a long life as a first-rate educator.

Dr. Sabah Nouri Al-Marzouk (Head of the Arabic Department, University of Babylon) evaluated 'Treasures of the Past' in 1996, commending its rich preservation of Hilla's mid-20th-century heritage, local dialogues, and literary figures.

Haj Ismail Al-Qayem (Bookbinder) recalled in an interview on February 1, 2026, his long relationship with Abu Khumra, who visited his shop in 1994 accompanied by Sayyid Moez Al-Qazwini to bind his manuscripts on Hilla's prominent families and clans.

3. Scholars, Diwans, and Mosques of Hilla in Abu Khumra's Writings

3.1 Educational Centers, Homes of Scholars, and Libraries

The flourishing intellectual life of Hilla since the 6th century AH was driven by its residents' passion for learning. In the absence of formal state schools during early periods, education developed through distinct institutions:

1. Mosques: Functioned as primary religious and intellectual institutions where scholars, orators, and poets conducted study circles.

2. Homes of Scholars: Served as major private academic centers. Families such as Al-Tawus, Al-Nama, and scholars like Hibatullah ibn Nama (565 AH), Arabi ibn Musafir (573 AH), and Ibn al-Idris al-Hilli (d. 598 AH) held regular academic sessions in their residences.

3. Quranic Schools (Kuttab): Provided elementary instruction in reading, writing, Quranic recitation, and basic literature under educators like Saad bin Muhammad al-Nili and Ibn al-Khazin.

4. Libraries (Khizanat al-Kutub): Established by Mazyadid rulers—such as Prince Sadaqa ibn Mansur, who owned thousands of volumes—and private scholars to foster intellectual discourse.

3.2 Scientific and Cultural Diwans of Hilla

Hilla has been renowned for its government and family diwans since the reign of Prince Saif al-Dawla Al-Mazyadi (495 AH), who hosted over 400 scholars. Abu Khumra meticulously documented the prominent diwans that served as cultural assemblies:

1. Grand Diwan of Sayyid Mahdi al-Qazwini (built in 1254 AH), succeeded by Sayyid Muhammad al-Qazwini.

2. Diwan of the Hitawiyin, built by Sayyid Ibrahim bin Sayyid Ahmad.

3. Diwan of Sheikh Sha'ban al-Baghdadi.

4. Diwan of Abdul Majid Bey.

5. Diwan of Hajj Jaber Effendi (Mufti of Hilla).

6. Diwan of Hajj Hassan Alloush, succeeded by Hajj Majid and Hajj Amin.

7. Diwan of the Al-Mawla family, built by Haj Mohsen Al-Mawla.

8. Diwan of Sayyid Salman al-Husseini al-Hilli (family of Sayyid Haydar al-Hilli).

9. Diwan of Sheikh Mahmoud Samaka.

10. Diwan of Hajj Mehdi Al-Sharif.

11. Diwan of Al-Saeed, built by Muhammad Al-Saeed.

12. Diwan of Hajj Jawad Al-Sayed Hassan Abu Khumra.

13. Diwan of Al-Wa'iz, built by Jamil and Muhammad Amin al-Wa'iz.

14. Diwan of Al-Awad, built by Sheikh Yusuf Awad.

15. Diwan of Haj Mahdi Al-Falluji.

16. Diwan of Mr. Ahmed Al-Salem.

17. Diwan of Sayyid Hamad Kamal al-Din.

18. Diwan of Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Al-Shalah.
19. Diwan of Arif, succeeded by Babir, Jalal, Abdullah, and Hassan.
20. Diwan of Al-Mutairi, built by Haj Aqil Al-Mutairi.
21. Diwan of Sheikh Hassan Ajam.
22. Additional late 13th-century diwans: Sheikh Salman Al-Barrak, Sayyid Adi Al-Qazwini, Sayyid Muhsin Al-Qazwini, Sayyid Mirza Ja'far Al-Qazwini, Haj Abdul Abbas Marjan, Haj Abdul Karim Al-Manashteh, Haj Abdul Ridha Marjan, Usta Jaber, Lawyer Nour Al-Jawhar, Sayyid Muhammad al-Baqir, and Sayyid Hussein al-Safi.

3.3 Comprehensive Inventory of Hilla's Mosques and Shrines

Abu Khumra documented local neighborhood mosques, specifying their area, original construction materials (stone, mud, palm trunks), foundation dates, and modern renovation details:

1. Imam Ali Mosque (□) / Maqam Mashhad al-Shams: Located 2 km northeast of Hilla on the Tuwairij road. Historically associated with Nebuchadnezzar and the encampment of Imam Ali (□). Constructed with clay and palm roots on a 25m square footprint, later renovated with brick walls by the Endowments Department.

2. Al-Mazer II Mosque: Built in 493 AH by Prince Saif al-Dawla al-Asadi adjacent to the Emirate Palace (area > 200 m²). Featured a 10-meter conical minaret preserved until the 1920s. Contains the tomb of Prince Ali Al-Mazer (540 AH).

3. Yahya bin Saeed Al-Hudhali School/Mosque (Cimetière of the Four Scholars): Located at the junction of Al-Jami'ayn, Jubran, and Al-Ta'q quarters. Registered in Ottoman Tabu records (192 m², No. 435 Taq). Contained scholar graves, a mortuary, and the Beit Muraid cemetery (bulldozed in 1975).

4. Mosques in the University / Al-Jami'een Quarter:

- Sheikh Ali al-Shafi'i Shrine & Mosque: Originally built of mud and palm trunks; reconstructed with bricks and iron by Hajj Hassan Marjan in 1954.

- Youth Mosque (Al-Shatt Mosque): 140 m², established two centuries ago by Ghazwan and Shaa families; renamed Hussein Youth Mosque and rebuilt in 1958 by Hajj Hassan Marjan.

- Najm al-Din Shrine & Mosque (Abu Rahma): 36 m², housing the grave of Najm al-Din Abu Bakr bin Qawam al-Din bin Ali bin Tawus; rebuilt in 1948 by Hajj Hassan Marjan.

- Al-Aloush Mosque: Built over 150 years ago from Babylonian stone and mud by Haj Hassan Alloush.

- Abu Haram Al-Hilli Mosque: 25 m², built of mud and palm fronds.

- Akkad Dabban Mosque: 108 m², rebuilt with bricks and iron in 1968.

- Haj Hamazi Mosque: 60 m², built 150 years ago, renovated in 1962 by Haj Ali Al-Mazi.

- Daughters of Al-Hassan Mosque & Shrines: 400 m², maintained by the Al-Awad family for over 150 years, renovated in 1950 by Hajj Amin bin Hajj Ali.

- Shrine of the Three Scholars: Located in Akd Kamra near Ibn al-Hasan Mosque; contains three ancient scholar tombs built over a historical basement.

- Akd Yourmah Mosque: 30 m², 150 years old, modernised in 1960 by Hajj Radhi Shanawa.

- Dr. Radhi Mosque: 30 m², built over 150 years ago, rebuilt in 1980.

5. Mosques in the Jubran Quarter:

- Souq Al-Khabaza Mosque: 200 m², built over a century ago, renovated in 1964 by Hajj Hassan Marjan.

- Al-Saffarin Mosque: 50 m², over 100 years old, rebuilt in 1966 by Hajj Abdul Hussein Al-Saffar.

- Akd Antique Mosque: 10 m², constructed with bricks and iron in 1955.

- Jabran Mosque: 50 m², built near the salt bath in 1955 by Haj Abdul Razzaq Sharif.

- Sunni Mosque: 100 m², over 100 years old, renovated in 1968 by Hajj Hussein Hamza.

- Al-Mufti Mosque No. 1: 70 m², 150 years old, served as a kuttap until renovated in 1968.

- Al-Mufti Mosque No. 2: 250 m², built in 1972 by Haj Jaafar Baqir Ajam.

- Hamza Al-Halak Mosque: 20m², built by neighborhood residents.

- Akd Al-Weaver Mosque: 30 m², built in 1970.

- Jarah Market Mosque: 50 m², built two centuries ago, renovated in 1945.

- Traders' Market Mosque: 120 m², over 100 years old, renovated in 1970 by Hajj Hassan Marjan.

- Swimming Pool Akd Mosque: 195 m², built in 1950 by Muhammad Hassan.

- Akd Amazingor Mosque: 30 m², over 100 years old, renovated in 1940 by Haj Baqir Ajam.

- Akd Al-Jayayil Mosques (No. 1 & No. 2): 36 m² (built in 1940 by Hajj Jaber Kamkam) and 45 m² (built in 1972 by Abdul Sada Al-Qawizi).

- Al-Quaz Mosque: 30 m², built in 1972.

- Al-Mashata Mosque: 200 m², built in 1920 by Hajj Abdul Redha Al-Mashata, later supervised by Sheikh Abdul Karim Al-Mashta.

6. Mosques in the Al-Taq, Al-Kawazin, and Al-Mahdia Quarters:

- Al-Qazwini Mosque (Al-Taq): 3,300 m², founded in 1252 AH by Sayyid Mahdi Al-Qazwini with fired bricks and mortar. Served as a religious school and sanctuary.

- Imam Ali Mosque (Al-Taq): Expansively rebuilt to over 2,300 m² in 1987-1990 by Haj Hadi Sahib al-Nufaili in Andalusian style.

- Al-Kawazin Mosque: 220 m², built in 1900, rebuilt with solid brick foundations in 1920 by Haj Salman Obeid Al-Kawaz.

- Souq Al-Qutn Mosque (Al-Mahdia): 2,250 m², over 200 years old, renovated in 1961 with a 30-meter minaret.

- Abu Hawad Mosque: 500 m², founded in 1910 by Sayyid Haider bin Sayyid Dawood Al-Husseini.

4. Conclusion

The historical and field writings of Professor Mahmoud Shukr Abu Khumra represent an invaluable cultural treasure for the city of Hilla and Iraqi

historiography. By combining rigorous field observation, hand-drawn cartography, oral interviews, and archival documentation, he successfully preserved the memory of Hilla's scholars, traditional educational centers, family diwans, and neighborhood mosques. His selfless life as an educator, philanthropist, and heritage guardian exemplifies the vital role of local intellectuals in safeguarding national heritage for future generations.

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