

**Sufi Practices in the Islamic Society - Concepts and Meanings**

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**Abstract:**

Sufism, as a phenomenon, manifests a universal human tendency that has manifested across diverse cultures to varying degrees. At its core, it embodies the pursuit of spiritual fulfilment and the relinquishment of ephemeral worldly pleasures. Sufism aspires to transcend material cravings, striving for spiritual purity and the attainment of inner contentment.

Within the Muslim context, this inclination towards spiritual dimensions has never been forsaken. Instead, it has led individuals to embrace the realms of spiritual practice, renouncing materialistic pursuits in favour of seeking elevated spiritual states. Nonetheless, the specific characteristics of Sufism vary across societies due to the distinct beliefs inherent to each community. In Islamic societies, Sufism stands as an extension of religious teachings, deeply rooted in the foundational values of the faith. It finds its origins in the path of renunciation set forth by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), his companions, and the generations of righteous individuals who followed.

**Keywords:** Practices, Sufism, Islamic society, concepts, meanings.

Sufism occupies a pivotal position within the framework of Islamic thought. Evolving across different epochs with diverse intentions and objectives, it has transformed from individualistic pursuits to organised religious sects. The foundational pillars of Sufism encompass three integral elements: Sufi literature, spiritual practices, and Sufi reform (JamiHamdaoui, p. 1).

Sufi paths bear profound significance within the realm of intellectual discourse, representing intricate and multifaceted aspects entrenched within

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our cultural and religious heritage (Abd El-Moneim Al-Qasimi Al-Hasani, Algeria, p. 1). The present research endeavours to shed light on the quintessence of Sufism, both in terms of linguistic semantics and terminological significance. Its objective is to delve into the evolutionary phases that Sufism has traversed and its sources of origin. These sources affirm its lineage stemming from the teachings of renunciation set forth by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his venerable companions, elucidating how this comprehensive context has profoundly influenced the tapestry of Islamic culture.

### **1) Concept of Sufism:**

Before embarking on an exploration of the vast realm of Sufism, it is imperative to elucidate its linguistic and terminological underpinnings. The necessity arises from the diverse interpretations that have emerged, owing to the proliferation of Sufi scholars who have engaged with it as a subject of profound inquiry. These scholars have approached Sufism as a behavioural journey rooted in asceticism, as a framework of guiding principles and ethical values that set Sufis apart, and even as a comprehensive life philosophy dedicated to attaining moral excellence and spiritual fulfilment.

#### **A. Linguistic aspect:**

The term "Sufism" is derived from the verb (صَوَّفَ sawwafa), which means to make something (صُوفِيًّا sufiyyan) which means "Sufi, implying the embodiment of Sufi ethics. Sufism refers to a category of devout individuals, and a person described as a Sufi falls within this category (Henry Corbin, Aouidate, 1977, p. 282). The term "Sufi" designates a collective of ascetics and mystics who are practitioners of Sufism.

The definition of Sufism in the "Dictionnaire de civilisation musulmane" (Dictionary of Islamic Civilisation) states that Sufism, or "le Soufisme" in French, originates from the Arabic word (صوف sawf) which is wool (Ahmad Hasan, Beirut, 1998, p. 139). This word is used to describe the fur of an animal. This connotation is applied metaphorically to a form of clothing, considering that this group of people is associated with wearing woollen garments, hence the term Sufi (صوفي Sufiyy).

The definition of Sufism provided in the "Dictionnaire de civilisation musulmane" (Dictionary of Islamic Civilization) indicates that Sufism, known as "le Soufisme" in French, finds its origin in the Arabic word (صوف sawf), which literally translates to wool (Ahmad Hassan, Beirut, 1998, p. 139). This term, originally referring to the fleece of an animal, takes on a

metaphorical meaning when applied to a particular type of attire. This association emerges from the practice of a group of individuals who are often seen wearing woollen garments, leading to the designation of the term "Sufi" (صوفي Sufiyy).

In his renowned work, the Muqaddimah, Ibn Khaldun asserted, "Al-Qushayri, may Allah have mercy upon him, stated that the name 'Sufi' does not have a straightforward etymology in terms of the Arabic language or linguistic analogy. It appears to be a proper noun. Those who propose its derivation from purity 'Safa' or attribute or quality 'Sifah' stray from the realm of linguistic parallels. He further contended that it might be related to 'Suf'... I maintain that the plausible inference, if one insists on tracing its origin, is its connection to 'Suf' (wool). This is predominantly because the Sufis were notable for adorning themselves with woollen attire, consciously diverging from the prevalent norm of luxurious clothing and, instead, embracing the choice of wearing coarse woollen garments" (Ibn Khaldun, Lebanon, p. 467–468). This statement reinforces the preceding assertion that the term is intricately linked to external appearances, particularly clothing, serving as a symbolic representation of asceticism and ruggedness.

The etymological interpretations of the term "Sufism" encompass several derivatives, including "Sufi," "Sufah," "Ahl al-Sifahwa al-Suf," "Safa," and "Sufwa."

The term "Sufi" does not encompass the connotation of wisdom. Rather, it signifies reason and logic, aspects that stand in contrast to spiritual enlightenment and emotional discernment. On the contrary, Sufism is not primarily aligned with rationality and intellect; rather, it gravitates towards intuition and inner experiential understanding. Consequently, there exists no basis for associating "Sufi" with the concept of wisdom, which pertains to the philosophical and intellectual domain. This distinction underscores the divergence between "Sufi," representing wisdom, and Sufism, which is intrinsically linked to matters of spirituality and the mystical realm.

There are those who associate Sufism with "Sufah," like Ibn al-Jawzi. During the pre-Islamic era, there were people who devoted themselves to worship and circumambulating the Kaaba. Their lineage traces back to Ghawth ibn Mar, who was known as "Sufah," a name given to him by his mother because she did not have other children. She vowed that if she were blessed with a child, she would place a woollen garment on his head and dedicate him to the Kaaba. Ghawth was born, known by the name "Sufah,"

and the association continued with his descendants. This viewpoint, though mentioned, is generally rejected and does not serve as a foundational argument. It is an exception and not a reliable basis for deriving Sufism from Sufah.

Another perspective links the term to the asceticism of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his companions (may Allah be pleased with them). Anas reported that the Prophet (peace be upon him) ate coarse food and wore coarse garments, specifically wool, as mentioned in IbnMajah's narration. This viewpoint is also questionable because the Prophet (peace be upon him) wore both wool and non-wool garments. Simultaneously, he promoted a life that embraced the beauties of the world without excess or extravagance, advocating for a moderate and ascetic lifestyle

Additionally, an illogical connection is made between attribute and Sufism, specifically with the Muhajirin and Ansar, who are referred to as (صوفيSafiyy) and not (صوفيSufiyy). This introduces a distortion in linguistic logic. It has been said that the term "Sufism" refers to those who possessed the attribute of being impoverished ascetics among the migrating companions. They resided in the row of the mosque in Medina. Some of them committed to this attribute and continued to reside there. Due to their intense asceticism, they often wore woollen garments, which led to their close association with the term Sufi.

Among them are those who connected Sufism to wearing wool, which was a visual symbol representing mystical practices, asceticism in life, frugality in worldly matters, and dedicating oneself to worship, prayer, and supplication.

Historical accounts mention that many of the companions, out of asceticism and devotion, would wear wool garments. Al-Hasan al-Basri says, "I encountered seventy Badri Companions whose clothing was wool". The Badri Companions" were those who participated alongside the Prophet (peace be upon him) in the Battle of Badr. Nevertheless, this characteristic cannot be universally applied, as woollen clothing does not always signify piety and righteousness in Arab-Islamic culture. Even among its wearers, the term has varied implications. IbnAbdRabbih, the author of "Al-Iqd al-Farid," quotes verses from the poet Mahmoud al-Warraaq that describe these mystics:

تصوف كي يقال له أمين وما يعني التصوف والأمانة  
ولم يرد الإله به ولكن أراد به الطريق إلى الخيانة

[Tasawwufkīyaqālalahuamīn, Wamāya'nī at-taṣawwufwa al-amānah]  
[Wa lam yurid al-ilāhubihīwalakin, Arādabihīaṭ-ṭarīqilā al-khiyānah.]

Even if we were to consider this compelling argument aligned with reason and close to logic, it remains an oversimplification. As indicated, Christian Sufi monks used to wear wool in their monasteries and churches, influencing Shia and esoteric groups in their attire, a practice that continues to this day.

However, beyond the realm of wool and clothing type, some find in Sufism a path towards purity and refinement. Sufis are primarily engaged in purifying their hearts from bodily impurities and worldly desires, aiming to achieve spiritual purity and the purification of their hearts from the blemishes and defilements of this world. This perspective aligns closely with reason and logic. Nevertheless, it does not align with the linguistic rationale that links purity (صفاءsafa) to a pure person (صفويSafawi) rather than Sufi.

Indeed, Sufism is more closely connected to wool (صوفsuf) than to anything else. This viewpoint is adopted by Ahmed Amin in his book "Zuhur al-Islam": "People have debated the origin of the word. Is it derived from attribute or quality (صفةsifah), purity (صفاءsafa), Sufi, which has a Greek connotation of wisdom, or wool? We lean towards it being derived from wool (صوفsuf), as these groups initially wore wool as a form of asceticism and renunciation. We also propose that in their early stages, they were rooted in an Islamic foundation". (Ahmed Amin, Lebanon, 5th edition, 1969, p. 150).

Furthermore, we can provide another piece of evidence through the story of Muhammad ibn Wasi' with Qutaibah ibn Muslim al-Bahili, the governor of Khorasan. Muhammad entered Qutaibah's presence wearing a coarse woollen cloak, which might have been worn out and worn. Qutaibah inquired, "What leads you to wear this attire? Muhammad remained silent, refraining from offering an immediate response. Qutaibah, somewhat resembling annoyance, pressed further, "Shall I speak to you if you do not answer me? Muhammad, displaying humility and tranquilly, replied, "I am averse to claiming asceticism to purify myself or asserting poverty to seek solace in my Lord". (Ibn Abd Rabbih, Part 6, p. 225-226).

These instances signify the absence of unanimous consensus on a definitive definition, albeit leaning towards wearing wool as an expression of asceticism and renunciation in pursuit of spiritual purity and divine communion.

**B. Terminological aspect :**

It is difficult to confine a comprehensive definition to Sufism due to its progression through various stages across different eras combined with its individualistic spiritual experience. While its adherents may agree on general principles, their personal experiences have varied from person to person and era to era, rendering the formulation of a universal definition challenging.

Undeniably, Sufism emerged as a religious movement within the Islamic world, countering indulgence and corruption and aiming to tame the self and subject it to attaining true, absolute knowledge. Among these definitions is IbnKhalidun's view: "Devotion to worship, detachment unto God Almighty, turning away from the adornments and beautifications of the world, renouncing the pleasures, wealth, and status that the majority seeks, and seeking solitude for worship". (IbnKhalidun, Lebanon, p. 467). It is a spiritual journey rooted in asceticism and self-denial, a divine journey that eradicates corruption and strives for enlightenment.

Dhul-Nun al-Misri expressed, "To possess nothing is to be possessed by nothing." Al-Hasan al-Huseini said about al-Hasan al-Basri, "What is your definition of a Sufi? He replied, "One whom neither the earth can restrain nor the heavens shade." (Ahmad Amin, "Dhuhur al-Islam," p. 152-153). It is the pinnacle of dissolution in divine love.

Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali defines it as "the subjugation of the self to servitude and the attachment of the heart to divine lordship. It involves purifying the heart from the company of worldly distractions, detaching from natural inclinations, suppressing human traits, transcending base motives, attaining spiritual qualities, embracing true knowledge, and adhering to the teachings of the Prophet in Islamic law".(al-Ghazali - Egypt, 1924, p. 143). It pertains to the purification of souls, the clarity of hearts, and the rectification of character.

Ibrahim Basyuni (Ibrahim Basyuni, Egypt, 1969, pp. 17–24) classified a range of definitions concerning Sufism, dividing them into three categories:

1. The initial category addresses the beginnings: Sufism as the renunciation of worldly desires and the love for the Almighty.

2. The second category discusses the endeavours: Sufism as a form of character refinement: the more you excel in character refinement, the more you attain purity. Sufism is characterised by possessing nothing and being possessed by nothing. It involves minimal food consumption, tranquilly, and aligning with the ranks of the impoverished.
3. The third category delves into the experiences: Sufism is being with God without intermediaries; it is an ongoing engagement of the soul with God according to its yearnings. Eventually, Sufism awakens an inherent disposition that directs the sincere soul to strive until it experiences the taste of divine proximity, connecting with the Absolute Existence (Ismail Mahmoud, 2000, p. 217).

Avicennadefines it as: "It is the person who is absorbed in contemplation towards the sacred essence of omnipotence, perpetually aligned with the dawn of the light of truth within his secret self". (Avicenna, Cairo, 1948, p. 45–17)

Sufism is an Islamic doctrine and a methodology followed by the servant to attain closeness to Allah, knowledge of Him, and awareness of Him. This is achieved through diligent worship, avoiding prohibitions, nurturing the self, purifying the heart from all worldly impurities, and cultivating virtuous conduct. It epitomises the experiential outcome of the unifying encounter between the believer and the Divine, ultimately leading to profound enlightenment. The more one distances oneself from the clutches and embellishments of the material world, the closer one comes to spiritual fulfilment.

## **2) Stages:**

Undoubtedly, Islamic Sufism has passed through several historical stages, each with its own distinctive characteristics and prominent figures, surpassing the realm of personal experiences to encompass deep and enduring human experiences.

### **a) The Stage of Asceticism:**

Asceticism emerged with the advent of the Islamic call in the first Hijri century, influenced by the teachings of the religion that emphasized renunciation and austerity. Additionally, the expansion of the Islamic state and exposure of the corruptive opulence of worldly life, including the assassinations of figures like Othman and Ali, prompted individuals to detach from worldly matters and their allure, turning instead towards the worship of the sole God.

Al-Hasan al-Basri stands as an exemplar of this stage, as do the revered Four Rightly Guided Caliphs, in addition to the pious Companions and the Successors (Tabi'in), especially figures like Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, Salman al-Farsi, Suhayb, Abu al-Darda, and others...

**b) The Sunni Sufi Stage:**

The transition from individual asceticism to organised Sufism marks the emergence of Sunni Sufism. This form of Sufism adheres to the Quran and the Sunnah (Prophet's traditions) and relies on them as primary sources of Sufi knowledge. It distances itself from exaggerated mystical experiences and miraculous feats (karamat), representing the accepted form of Sufism.

This particular form of Sufism only manifested itself in the second Hijri century, especially after the Islamic conquests and the spread of prosperity in the Islamic environment. This period saw a rise in cultural refinement alongside the proliferation of corruption and decadence. In response, some individuals chose seclusion (khalwa) and asceticism (zuhd), following the path of the Prophet and making it a way of life encompassing worship and seclusion (i'tikaf).

Certain Sufi figures, such as al-Hallaj, faced persecution from scholars and extremists. Disputes about the true nature of Sufism emerged around the middle of the third Hijri century/ninth century CE between the scholars of Basra and the Sufis. This led to a series of persecutions in Egypt, the Levant, and Iraq, culminating in the tragedy of al-Hallaj's torture and execution.

Prominent Sufi authors at this stage, including al-Qushayri, 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, and Ahmad al-Badawi, penned important texts on the Sufi experience and consolidated its principles. Amid this context, Harith al-Muhasibi is acknowledged as the foremost advocate of moderate Sunni Sufism, noted for his unwavering commitment to interpretation and his avoidance of extremism. Furthermore, he withstood the influence of esoteric Shi'ism.

In the fifth Hijri century, the tradition of moderate Sunni Sufism continued, as exemplified by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. His efforts were aimed at re-establishing Sufism on its rightful course and aligning it with mainstream Sunni beliefs. His work "Ihya' Ulum al-Din" (The Revival of Religious Sciences) became a cornerstone of Sunni Sufism, reconciling jurisprudential discourse with the mystical and bridging the gap between religious legalism and inner spirituality.

Key principles of Sunni Sufism include respect for Quranic and Sunnah principles, adhering to religious practices, striving for sustenance while maintaining work ethics, and elevating the status of prophets in comparison to saints, sheikhs, and spiritual leaders.

**c) The Philosophical Sufi Stage:**

Emerging in the sixth and seventh centuries of the Hijri calendar, this stage was influenced by various philosophies, particularly those of the Greeks. The establishment of the House of Wisdom during the reign of al-Ma'mun fostered the translation movement, facilitating the transfer of Greek thought into the Islamic realm. The spread of religious and philosophical schools across the Islamic empire led to the emergence of philosophical Sufism. Ahmed Amin notes, "With the spread of Islamic conquests and the mingling of diverse cultures, Greek philosophy, especially modern Platonism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism, all found their way into asceticism and divine love. Sufism drew lessons from all these sources".(Ahmed Amin, Lebanon, 5th edition, 1969, pp. 150–151)

Suhrawardi exemplifies this trend, following in the footsteps of the Illuminations school of IbnSina, which was influenced by modern Platonism. Similarly, MuhyiddinIbnArabi emphasised the unity of existence, and Ibn Sabin formulated his theory of absolute unity, aiming to reconcile Islamic texts with imported Western philosophy to uncover the essence of existence.

As for al-Hallaj, he introduced the theory of Divine incarnation, asserting that Allah, in His majesty, became one with the human soul. Al-Hallaj famously stated, "I am the Truth", and "There is nothing in the cloak but Allah". His apparent confession led to his crucifixion, as he was accused of heresy and open proclamation.

Following this stage, Sufism faced a period of decline, partly due to persecution of Sufis and tightening restrictions. During this time, philosophers focused on various topics, including:

- Struggles and their effects on spiritual experiences, coupled with self-accountability for one's actions.
- Perceiving the hidden realities, such as divine attributes, the Throne, and angels.
- Interactions with the world through extraordinary phenomena and miraculous acts.
- The emergence of ambiguous expressions that are superficially coherent but known as "shatahat" (literally, deviations)

This stage eventually led to a sense of decline, influenced by the oppression of Sufis and their limitations. Some of the key subjects explored by philosophers during this period included various spiritual struggles, the apprehension of hidden truths, and miraculous acts, all of which contributed to the intricate evolution of Sufism.

**d) Doctrinal or path-based Sufism:**

Sufism transitioned from being an individual practice to a collective path, giving rise to what is known as "Tariqa," which refers to various paths attributed to specific masters. These masters have followers and successors who receive authorization and guidance from them.

This phenomenon contributed to the proliferation of Tariqas across the Islamic world, often associated with zawiyas (spiritual centres) and mosques. Examples include the Tijaniyya, Shadhiliyya, Alawiyya, Qadiriyya, Gilaniyya, Idrisiyya, Nasiriyya, and Harraqiyya, among many others.

Sufism, as a spiritual journey, encompasses a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning involves purification and detachment from the illusory world. The middle phase includes seclusion, spiritual exercises, and Sufi striving. The culmination, in the end, represents divine union and spiritual connection.

**3) Sources of Sufism:**

Sufism did not emerge and develop in isolation; rather, it was influenced by both internal and external sources. We elucidate these sources as follows:

**A. Internal Sources:**

These direct influences on the emergence and development of Sufism can be traced to the Quran, the Sunnah, and the political and social circumstances of the Islamic community.

**1 The Quran:**

The Quran serves as the primary source of the Divine Law, advocating asceticism through its verses that emphasize renunciation of worldly possessions, calling for piety, and the fear of God. These are attributes embraced by Sufis in their pursuit of purifying their hearts through worship and devotion.

**2 The Prophetic Tradition (Sunnah):**

The noble example of Prophet Muhammad provides the greatest model of asceticism and detachment from worldly pleasures. His seclusion in the cave of Hira aimed to reflect on the universe's realities. The Prophet and his

companions set a moderate example of asceticism, with their lives serving as a paradigm of balanced renunciation.

**B. External Sources:**

While Sufism remains rooted in Islamic sources, it has also been influenced by external factors. Notable among these is the influence of Christianity.

**1. Christianity:**

Christianity spread across much of the Arabian Peninsula, and many of the translators during that time were Christians. Moreover, some Sufis originate from Christian backgrounds. While some Orientalists highlight similarities between Christianity and Sufism in terms of practices, attire, solitude, and recitation, there is a clear distinction between Sufism and monasticism, indicating that Sufism does not owe its origins or principles to Christianity.

Sufism, as an Islamic tradition, finds its core principles in the Quran and the Prophetic tradition. While influenced by external factors, such as Christianity, Sufism retains its distinctive Islamic identity and principles.

**2. Persian Religion:**

This source asserts that liberation from material constraints is attainable only through liberation from the constraints of the physical body, ultimately leading to purity. These concepts have had an impact on Islamic Sufism.

**3. Indian Religion:**

While the influence of Indian religion on Sufism was not particularly strong, both traditions share practices of meditation and seeking solutions, as advocated by Indian sages, through meditation and subsequent realization.

**4. Jewish Religion:**

Upon entering the realm of Islam, some Jews incorporated numerous narrations (Isra'iliyat) into Islamic thought, particularly relating to the theory of divine incarnation and Islamic philosophy.

**5. Greek Philosophy:**

Some attribute the linguistic origin of Sufism to the Greek word "Sophia". Additionally, Muslims were exposed to Greek philosophy, especially that of Plato, and were influenced by its contemplation of the nature of the universe.

Sufism is fundamentally rooted in Islamic sources, transcending specific times and places. Its essence is shaped by the spiritual elevation espoused by Islam. This does not negate the influence of other religions, especially in light of the Islamic translation movement and the spread of Islamic conquests.

**4) Evaluation of Sufism:**

Scholars have divided into two camps regarding the value of Sufism. Some view it positively, while others hold a negative perspective. Among the latter is Dr. Muhammad 'Abed Al-Jabri, who considered Sufi mystical thought to be mythical and legendary, representing a fatalistic approach. According to Al-Jabri, "the truth in Sufism is neither religious truth nor philosophical truth nor scientific truth. Instead, their truth is the magical view of the world that is sanctified by myth." (Muhammad 'Abed Al-Jabri, Beirut, 2009, p. 390)

On the other hand, the positive view perceives Sufism as a sanctuary to which Sufis turn to confront the challenges of their spiritual lives. Additionally, Sufism plays a directive, transformative, and introspective role, offering guidance and self-discipline.

**Conclusion:**

Sufism is a religious methodology and a way of life that requires understanding its true essence and grounding it in its authentic context. This is to avoid any confusion with Western philosophies and emerging trends seeking to blur its distinctive features. Consequently, the following points are highlighted:

- Sufism exhibits linguistic and terminological variations, underscoring its enigmatic nature.
- During the era of the companions of the Prophet, the concept of asceticism ('zahid') emerged and gradually evolved into the term 'Sufi'.
- Sufism entails purifying the heart from sins through seclusion and refining the soul from the allurements of the worldly life.
- It advocates adherence to the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet, representing a moderate form of religion.
- Its primary source is Islam, and any deviation from this foundation results from its interaction with other religions.
- While asceticism ('zuhd') is an inherent aspect of the religion, Sufism is an innovation; hence, it has been criticised and negatively regarded.
- Islam is the religion of balance, harmonising between the material and spiritual realms and guiding humanity towards the path of truth.
- Sufism has undergone four major stages: asceticism, Sunni Sufism, philosophical Sufism, and the stage of Sufi orders.

- In the contemporary world, there is a significant need for Sufism that aligns with modernity and scientific progress, addressing the challenges faced by the contemporary Islamic world.
- Every Muslim has the potential to embody Sufism within their creed and thought process, following the guidance of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

Indeed, today we are in great need of a contemporary Sufism that can engage with modernity and scientific advancement and that can provide solutions to the challenges faced by the contemporary Islamic world. Every Muslim has the right to aspire to be a Sufi within their own school of thought and in their own way of thinking. This is the path shown by the Prophet (peace be upon him).

In conclusion, Sufism remains a rich and intricate dimension of Islamic spirituality, evolving over time while preserving its core values. Its exploration is essential to understanding the diverse spiritual landscape within Islam and its enduring impact on the lives of countless individuals.

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