



## *Plunging into the wave's ebb: Sufi words, biographies of humanity*

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Every culture develops within its own distinctive framework, in which discourses on identity are differently modulated and shared: ideas and modes of thought are the locus of cultural projections, laden with a specific historical and social heritage. However, these frameworks should ideally be elastic enough to allow for the exchange and spread of those specific and universal values which form the foundation of successful multicultural societies.

This paper aims at highlighting the connection between Sufism, the generally accepted name for Islamic mysticism (Schimmel 1975), and the concept of identity, looking at how the latter relates to the Islamic spiritual tradition as handed down in the works of some representative medieval Sufis. Furthermore, whilst dealing with issues ranging from the use of language to themes of love and knowledge, this work intends to emphasize the role of the spiritual dimension in forming the base for those universal values which are at the core of multicultural societies. The process of acquiring personal inward awareness can be seen as an important step towards improving intrapersonal relationships while spurring an active participation in social life.

'Sufism' comes from the Arabic word *ṣūfī*, which was applied to the early Muslim ascetics, as they used to wear cloaks of wool (*ṣūf*). Although some scholars have traced



the pre-Islamic roots of Sufism back to the early Christian mystics of Syria and Egypt (Hodgson 1958), Sufism developed mainly within the tenets of Islamic faith and teachings, from its emergence in the seventh century as an ascetic movement till its later institutionalization into the devotional orders or *ṭuruq* in the early thirteenth century (Trimingham 1998). The term 'Sufism' is however fluid and comprehensive, as it embraces both individual and collective spiritual tendencies, the development of which played an important role in the formation of Islamic cultures. My use of the term 'Sufism' in this paper refers mostly to the saying of the Sufi Junayd of Baghdad (d. 910): "We did not learn this science [mysticism] through 'what is said' (*qīl wa qāl*), but through personal privations [...]" (Massignon 2008: 98). While speaking about the "adventures of the mystics" in language, Paul Nwyia (1970: 4) draws attention to the fact that it is thanks to the mystics that "in the Arabic language, an authentic language, that of experience, was born". Therefore, in the following I propose to examine the role which Sufism, as an *experience* of the Self, can play both individually and collectively in the constitution of identity.

In Arabic, as in all Semitic languages, from the word's root one can derive many nouns and verbs carrying a common semantic load. The process of etymological derivation is called *ishtiḳāq*, which refers to the verb 'to break': through this process, each word can be 'broken' and brought back to its original root and semantic field (Versteegh 1997: 26, 111). By resorting to the *ishtiḳāq*, it is possible to perceive the evocative power of Arabic language, the structure and morphology of which make each word a texture of infinite suggestions. Among the many words signifying 'identity', the Arabic term *huwiyya* appears to be particularly pregnant with semantic shades: the word *huwiyya* derives, in fact, from the same etymological root as *huwa*, the personal pronoun 'he'. Therefore, one could say that here the concept of 'identity' linguistically implies the idea of a 'third person': the constitution of any individual identity includes of necessity the acknowledgment of an otherness, with which the self interrelates, in both the interior and the exterior dimensions. To proceed, one can observe that the Arabic *al-ākhar*, meaning 'the other', belongs to the same semantic field as *al-ākhirā*, 'the afterlife', thus evoking the idea of a connection, on a vertical axis, between the *here* and the *after*, the corporal and the spiritual, the human and the divine.

Who is the 'other' through whom individuals can build their own identities? It is interesting to focus here on some of the words which in Arabic refer to the 'foreigner', or 'the other from ourselves', such as *ajnabī*: the term *ajnabī*, 'foreigner', shares the same etymological root as *janba*, meaning 'beside, near, next to'; and also, the words *dakhīl*, meaning 'extraneous, stranger, exotic' and *dakhīla*, meaning 'the inner self', come from the same identical linguistic root. Once again we realize that the line between the self and the other is very subtle. How interesting is it, then, to discover that the Arabic word *gharīb* ('strange' or 'stranger') gives origin to the word *istighrāb*, which means 'wonder, surprise'. As if to suggest that as long as we are able to feel



wonder and admiration when meeting the other, we can cultivate the desire for knowledge, which will impel us to meet other cultures, ideas and thoughts.

A privileged place of cultural encounter is represented by spirituality, which is interpreted here in accordance with the connotations implied in its Arabic equivalent, *rūḥāniyya*. *Rūḥāniyya* is, in fact, the dimension of the spirit (*rūḥ*), a word that is etymologically linked with terms meaning 'wind', 'breath of life', 'errand in the evening', as well as 'rest', 'return' and 'fragrance'. Therefore, one can conceive of spirituality as a dimension of humanity, intrinsically in need of openness and movement, like a fragrance or a breath of wind.

#### PLUNGING INTO THE WAVE'S EBB: SUFIS' WORDS, BIOGRAPHIES OF HUMANITY

When viewed from an inter-textual angle, Sufis' writings represent a significantly inspiring approach to the issue of identity, seen in its relation to the concepts of spirituality and otherness. In the wake of mystical tradition, they provide valuable insights into relevant questions of individual and social concern.

Both from a historical and a phenomenological perspective, Sufism represents a heterogeneous and kaleidoscopic dimension of Islamic culture, embracing many different contexts and expressions. Unfortunately, as a result of the present tendency towards standardization of cultures and cultural differences, both the terms 'mystic' and 'Sufism' have often been subject to misconstrued representations, which somehow relegated their meaning to being synonymous with extravagant or strange beliefs and behaviour. Therefore, this discussion will try to present the original purport of Sufism as the existential horizon of humankind and also as the path to one's inward realization.

Far from being mere talk about God, Sufism is the experiencing of a living encounter with the innermost dimension of one's Self. Through the path toward self-realization, the human being explores the soul's depths and achieves awareness of his own identity by recognizing his relationship to the "Eternal and Infinite Source" (Lings 1999: 11):

From time to time a Revelation 'flows' like a great tidal wave from the Ocean of Infinitude to the shores of our finite world; and Sufism is the vocation and the discipline and the science of plunging into the ebb of one of these waves and being drawn back with it to its Eternal and Infinite Source.

In this sense, Sufism can be seen as a spiritual journey, which any individual undertakes when he sets out to search into his human existence and origins. The theme of the journey of the soul permeates the whole of Sufi literature, where the follower of a spiritual path is called *sālik* or 'traveller'. The uniqueness of each



individual's path is emphasized by Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240), who highlights the existence of different ways to pursue knowledge of the truth (Ibn 'Arabi 1987: 70): "Then you set out again on your journey and examine all that you have seen under different forms and representations. [...] The searcher's destination depends on the path he has followed."

From a 'pilgrim of the Absolute', the Sufi becomes a keen 'explorer of humanity', whose abysses he sounds, tossed between expanded joy (*bast*) and painful contrition (*qabḍ*), elevation and fall, sailing across the physical and the spiritual, the exterior and the interior dimensions of the Self. Hence, Sufism becomes a *narration* of the intriguing story of the human search for identity and the lives and words of Sufis can be read as biographies of humanity. In this light, Sufism represents a living and practicable space, where spiritualities can meet and trace a common ground for dialogue.

Within the Islamic cultural and religious frame, Sufi experience has been given a peculiar structure, contemplating a tripartite way (al-Sarrāj 1914): abiding by the revealed Law (*Sharī'a*), following a 'path' (*ṭarīqa*), and, finally, achieving insightful knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of the reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of Revelation. The interrelation between stages is clearly expressed by the eleventh-century Persian Sufi al-Hujwīrī (1967: 384): "The Law without the Truth is ostentation, and the Truth without the Law is hypocrisy." However, besides the many attempts to systematize mystical thought and make it an institutionalized practice, Sufism is first and foremost an experience of the Self, which accounts for its being a distinctive and a universal phenomenon at the same time (Guénon 1993).

Sufism's connection with one's personal interior individuality is symbolically expressed by Sufis' usage of the term 'taste' (*dhawq*) to signify the mystical experience. Soul and body, spirit and mind are totally integrated in a process of *embodiment*, which is peculiar to the modalities of learning and transmission of learning in the Semitic traditions: the acquisition of knowledge, be it mystical or secular, is seen as a process of internalization involving voice, language, postures and rituals as much as contemplation and thought (Bashir 2011). Therefore, language is deeply connected with both the spiritual and physical dimensions: suffice it to say that from the same root *b-l-gh* come the words *bulūgh*, 'puberty', and *bāligh*, meaning 'eloquent'. Physical maturity, which entails full responsibility in one's actions, including religious obligations, such as prayer and fasting, also implies a physical maturation in the capacity to speak (Messick 1996).

The vividness of expression, permeating many of Sufi writings, witnesses the authors' effort to convey into language issues and contents that have been intimately experienced rather than only theoretically formulated. Such an effort can be detected in much of Sufi poetry, whose style is rich in metaphors, allegories and other figures of speech derived from the physical world. For instance, it is interesting to note the frequent resorting to the image of water, a symbol which is familiar to Sufism, as we



read in the first verses of a poem by Jalāl al-Dīn Rumī (d. 1273), *Al-'ishq mā' al-ḥayāh*, 'Love is the water of life' (Scattolin 2008: 581): "Life without love is not Life / because Love is the water of life: / Embrace it, in your heart and in your spirit".

Water of love quenching the lover's thirst, water flooding into the ground, waves moving beyond boundaries: the vast imagery of water powerfully evokes the ideas of both fluidity and cohesion, sense of belonging, like the rivers' rising from their springs, and crossing of frontiers, like the torrents' overflowing the banks.

#### THE AGITATED LANGUAGE: TEXT, DESIRE AND NARRATION OF IDENTITIES

Reflecting on literary imagery leads us to put a particular focus on the issue of language and on its role in moulding the expression of one's Self, while touching the kernel of the complex question of the relation between speech and thought: both of them, in fact, are deeply intertwined and they participate, mutually nourishing one another, in the process of constituting identities.

Islamic societies are often defined as being "founded on the text" (Abū Zayd 2002: 13), meaning, by that, the dominating influence which the Holy Book, the Qur'ān, exerts over the constitution of both individual and collective identities. Indeed, the dogmatic creed in the sacredness of the Qur'ānic text, conceived of as a faithful transposition of the divine Word in Arabic, has often inhibited those attempts at interpretation which were feared to 'betray' the consolidated and collectively agreed upon tradition of classical exegesis. At the same time, the belief in the inimitability (*i'jāz*) of the Qur'ān has favoured an idea of the Text as the locus of the only possible Truth, the place where all that was *thinkable* had already found its mental and linguistic expression (Arkoun 1982). Not rarely has such a rigid approach inhibited the development of a critical attitude, the vacuum left by the lack of criticism being filled with an *excess* of identity: hence, the concepts of cohesion and sense of belonging have sometimes crystallized into an identification with a mythical *communal Self*, often made impervious to external contributions.

Fully aware of the risks involved in this stagnation of thought, many contemporary scholars call on the need for new approaches which can embrace impartial free-thinking. As free-thinking is necessarily combined with freedom of speech, the liberation of thought from the narrowness resulting from blind adherence to tradition can be achieved through a liberation of language. Nevertheless, the issue of language appears to be very delicate, especially when freedom of expression is confused with unrestrained liberty of speech. Fearing that, the famous Sufi Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 1021) of Nishapur included in his collection of Sufi 'rules of conduct' (*adab/ ādāb*) the following (Biagi 2010: 10): "*Adab* is that you guard your tongue when you speak, your heart when you are alone, your eye when you go out



[...]. If a person guards his moment (*waqt*) and keeps his secret (*sirr*), God preserves all his moments and protects every parts of his body”.

Showing the profound degree to which he himself participated in the experience of true love and the pursuit of intimate knowledge, al-Sulamī often deals with a theme which represents the *fil rouge* of Sufi speculations on language and behaviour, that is the delicate equilibrium between the interior and the exterior and, as directly concerns language, between ‘silence’ and ‘speech’. The *adab* of human beings, who embark upon the path towards self-discovery, encompasses many attitudes, among which is also not to engage in vain talk: Sufis’ appeal to keep silence, when needed, represents the other face of Sufis’ daring usage of language. Both attitudes highlight the importance of using language appropriately when communicating, as speech is the privileged means of interaction between humans.

Many a Sufi dramatically experienced the conflict between the necessity of keeping the secret of one’s inmost encounter with the Truth and the urge to convey it by words. In this sense, Sufism represents a distinctive place where human beings confronted themselves with the limits of language and tried to exploit all its potentialities for the purpose of communicating their own extraordinary, and almost inexpressible, experience. In this regard, an interesting figure is that of the Egyptian Sufi poet ‘Umar Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 1235). Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s mystical experience and the sophisticated beauty of his poetry have inspired many Muslims in their own spiritual journey toward the Truth: the sound and the rhythmical wording of his verses still enchant those who listen to his poems. Nonetheless, the poet’s works are among the most mysterious ones in the history of Sufi literature in Arabic, as his language represents “a particularly stubborn problem” (Nicholson 1989: 232). Moreover, Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s diction is deeply connected with his use of Arabic, filled with reminiscences from the Qur’ān and the whole literary and religious tradition of his time and place, which makes his vocabulary highly charged with meaning. The enigmatic character of the poet’s expressions, closely connected with the intense passion and glowing rapture enshrined in his verses, can be considered as highly emblematical of the complex dynamics underlying the relationship between human beings and language. Conscious that words can never fully convey his experience, the poet himself warns (Nicholson 1989: 244):

From me understands by allusion the one who has the taste (*dhawq*) of it, he can dispense with the clear explanations (required) by a fastidious inquirer. / None may divulge them without making his lifeblood the forfeit, and in symbols there is a meaning that words cannot define./ [...] How little may a heart communicate in the form of thought or a tongue utter in the mould of speech!”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On communicating by ‘allusion’, see also al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt* ‘l-Anwār, p. 261.





A living expression of a profound spiritual experience, the words of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, like those of many Sufis, are left to us as a 'reminder' (*dhikr*) of the Truth and as 'traces' of an experience of the Self encountered in its totality. As regards the relation between mystical inspiration and the modes of literary stylization, Massignon (2008: 167) proposes a significant meditation on the role which Sufis attribute to verbal communication:

It seems to me that the first Muslim mystics, in their short poems, offer us records, which are infinitely more genuine, concerning the origin of language, or the survival of that "human thought which is more valuable than the whole universe", as St. John of the Cross said. For them, words are neither a figure's decalcomania nor a concept's corpse: rather, they are an allusion to a spiritual reality, which is recoverable through a purifying way of conduct.

Reflecting on the power of speech allows us to recast the complex issue of identity by locating it at the nexus of different discourses, from psychoanalysis to Sufism, which are fruits of different, but surprisingly intertwining, perspectives on human subjectivity. Thus, for example, in psychoanalytic terms, the acquisition of language "plays a formative role in the constitution of the subject as a gap or 'lack', as something always 'other' to itself" (Ewing 1997: 27). With the entry into language, the individual is positioned in a Symbolic Order, or the order of signs, which is necessary to structure his unconscious and enter into a social discourse; yet, within it the subject experiences a sort of 'split' or alienation, because human being, as many Sufis witnessed, is ultimately ungraspable and never totally reducible to a "discursively constituted subject". Furthermore, the experience of encounter with language is "the source of an impossible desire [...] a desire for wholeness and plenitude" (ibid.: 28-29), a yearning for that original experience of fusion that cannot be fully recovered.

While meditating on the peculiarity of the Qur'ān's language and style, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1989: 47) recurs to this powerful similitude: "The text of the Quran reveals human language crushed by the power of the Divine Word. It is as if human language were scattered into a thousand fragments like a wave scattered into drops against the rocks at sea".

In a similar way, one could say that Sufi writings display human language with both the weakness and the eloquence inherent in it. If Sufism has made the desiring subject a central issue within its discourse, as desire is what urges human beings to draw closer to God and to attain reunion with their authentic Origin, at the same time, it is the place where the subject witnessed the (in)ability of language to capture the intensity of such desire. Dragged between the churning of joy and pain and the silence of inexpressible depths, the Sufi tries to make others perceive the original emotion that his heart has registered: in this attempt toward disclosing his experience, he sometimes resorts to expressions that might sound shocking, even hubristic, to the



understanding of those who are not grown into the mystic's inward transformation.<sup>2</sup> One can see, for instance, the famous verses by the Persian Sufi al-Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj, who was executed in Baghdad in 922 (Schimmel 2001: 32-33):

I am He Whom I love/ and He Whom I love is I.

[...]

Your spirit is mingled with my spirit as though / Wine were mixed with limpid water,

And when something touches You it touches me, / For I am You in every state.<sup>3</sup>

Al-Ḥallāj's poems and rhyming prose became a symbol of the Sufi's struggle between desire for union and suffering love, which can lead to martyrdom whenever the human being tries to give utterance to his experience of merging into the Divinity. Although such mystical statements have been often the object of many distortions and misinterpretations, they represented for some Sufis the only possible articulations they could find in human language: it is here, indeed, where Sufism becomes an experience of *disrupting* human language and manipulating it for the sake of conveying a message, that we can find a significant, although provocative, appeal to positively *agitate* language, which means to exploit it in all its potentialities and richness with the purpose of narrating one's identity, and thus creating a ground for sharing discourses and perspectives. As in al-Ḥallāj's case, many a Sufi suffered the consequences of such a daring approach to language, which witnesses how complex the path toward a conscious use of speech can be. However, only by being aware of this complexity, can the subject's movement through language take its authentic form. Thus, speech becomes a means through which human beings can extend themselves and their world, trace their own history and know the history of others.

#### THE FEELING OF LOVE AND THE IMPERATIVE OF KNOWLEDGE

As I focused on the issue of mystical experience and desire mediated through speech, I therefore start to move toward two themes, in which discourses on identity and inward realization appear to be perfectly attuned to the tradition of Sufism: the feeling of love and the imperative of knowledge.

As we have seen with al-Sulamī, Sufi tradition underlines the significance of keeping appropriate 'rules', as concerns behavioural conduct and language: a major

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<sup>2</sup> On the issue of *shataḥāt* or 'locutions divines', see L. Massignon, *Essai*, pp. 273-286; *id.*, "L'esperienza mistica e i modi di stilizzazione letteraria", in *Il Soffio dell'Islam*, pp. 139-145.

<sup>3</sup> Another Sufi, who was famous for his frequent resorting to 'theopathic locutions', is Bayazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (in Arabic, *Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī*, d. 874 or 877/8), a Persian mystic also known as *Sulṭān al-'arīfīn*, or 'The Sultan of the Gnostics': see, al-'Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā. Parole di Ṣūfī*, pp. 181-182.





trend of Sufi literature has been devoted to describing the proper behaviour to be followed by the spiritual seeker both in his outward and inward dimensions. Among these rules, a significant place was given to the concept of attaining awareness of one's own human value and thus to appreciation of humanity itself. Only through knowledge can this awareness be reached, and only through desire can authentic knowledge become a fruitful component of one's identity.

Moths gathered in a fluttering throng one night / to learn the truth about the candle's light [...] One flew till in the distance he discerned / a palace window where a candle burned / and went no nearer [...] / Another moth flew out – his dizzy flight / turned to an ardent wooing of the light; / [...] The flame engulfed his wing-tips, body, head; / his being glowed a fierce translucent red; / [...] He (the mentor) said: "He knows, he knows the truth we seek, / that hidden truth of which we cannot speak."

With these verses, the twelfth-century Persian mystic Farīd al-Dīn al-'Aṭṭār (1984: 206) poetically draws from al-Ḥallāj's famous metaphor of the moth and the flame to describe the modes of knowledge and their relation with desire. As we have seen, any individual, in his essence, is a desiring being, yearning for a 'place' where the boundaries between the self and the other break into an experience of totality and fusion. In Sufi words this event is called *fanā'* ('extinction') in God.<sup>4</sup>

Far from representing a total annihilation into an indistinct Oneness, the absorption of the moth within the flame can be interpreted as metaphorically depicting the real meaning of spirituality, which is not an abstract speculation about God, but a living encounter with the Other, felt and loved, sensed and suffered in His unity and in the multiplicity of His manifestations.

At the same time, the story eloquently explains the delicate dynamics lying beneath human desire for knowledge: the moth desires to know the nature of the flame but is burnt when flying too close. However, what appears to be 'the end' of the mystical experience, caused by the final extinction of one's self into the Self of the Other, represents indeed 'the beginning' of a new life, in which the individual turns back to the world, after being *transfigured* by his spiritual encounter with the Beloved.<sup>5</sup> One of the verbs which is used in the Qur'ān to mean 'to love' is *aḥabba*,<sup>6</sup> a term that in Arabic shares the same root of *ḥabb*, 'seed'. From God's Love springs human love, as man loves the One who loved him first. Thus we read in the Qur'ān (5:54): "[...] *bi-qawm<sup>in</sup> yuḥibbu<sup>hum</sup> wa-yuḥibbūna<sup>hu</sup>*" ("[Soon will God produce] a people whom He will love and they will love Him").

<sup>4</sup> On *fanā'* and Sufi technical terms, see "A Glossary of Sufi Technical Terms in the *Jawāmi' Ādāb al-Ṣūfiyya*" in Biagi, *Sufi Rules of Conduct*, pp. 91-131.

<sup>5</sup> See note n. 10 on the meaning of the term *kalīm*.

<sup>6</sup> For the Qur'ānic quotations I have referred to the translation into English by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'ān. Text, translation and commentary*, 1990.



As regards the purport of the term *aḥabba*, it is interesting to note that the word appears as an *hapax* only in this Qur'ānic verse, if referred to the feeling of love nurtured by God towards his creatures; in all the other verses, it connotes 'love' as a totally human emotion, often directed to other human beings or to the *dunyā* ('the life of this world'). Only in another verse (6: 95) does the root *ḥ-b-b* make its appearance in relation with God, who is called *Fāliq al-ḥabb*, "He Who causeth the seed grain [and the date stone] to split and sprout" (Yusuf Ali 1990: 321). The metaphor is stressed once again: like seed sown on earth, divine Love is scattered on the ground of humanity, inspiring human acts of love to grow and flourish. Moreover, love proves to be crucial to the process of life, to unite 'the end' with 'the beginning': it is what drives individuals to progress toward an inner rebirth. This new beginning, in Sufi's words, comes at the end of a path in which the seeker's research has grown into a full awareness of one's origin and ultimate scope. Rebirth implies transformation, as love penetrates into one's inner being making it receptive to the Lover's presence, as Rumī poetically says (Schimmel 2001: 85): "Every hair of mine has become through your love verse and *ghazal*<sup>7</sup>; / Every limb of mine has become from your taste a vat full of honey".

Thus the feeling of love strengthens human relationships, moving through hearing and speaking, through taste, looks and words, as evocated by a hadith qudsī<sup>8</sup> which is well known among Sufis (Glassé 2008: 503): "My servant does not cease to approach Me with acts of devotion, until I become the foot with which he walks, the hand with which he grasps, and the eye with which he sees". Hence, only through love does the creature become a manifestation of the Attributes of the Creator and the incarnation of His mercy.

The following verses by Rumī (1998: 32) eloquently stress the connection between love and knowledge; in fact, only by leaving "this world of ignorance" can human beings hope to attain that experience of merging with the Beloved, which represents the stage of inward realization: "I am the ocean / and its turbulent flood / Come merge with me, / leave this world of ignorance". Through *ishtiḳāq*, one can observe that the Arabic *muḥīṭ*, 'ocean', comes from the verbal form *aḥāṭa*, meaning 'to encompass, to embrace': like an ocean, love is the capacity to embrace the otherness, to encompass the differences that surround individuals. However, to embrace the other does not mean to remove diversity in order to reach an unvarying unity, but to respect peculiarities and distinction. This respect can only come from knowledge and, once again, we turn back to the Arabic word *aḥāṭa*, which also means 'to understand completely'. Therefore, embracing the otherness implies a process of understanding, which can be achieved only through education and learning. Otherwise, the *muḥīṭ*, the 'ocean', will easily change into a *ḥā'īṭ*, i.e. a 'wall' (a term which participates of the same

<sup>7</sup> Ghazal: 'love poetry'.

<sup>8</sup> The Hadiths (traditions relating to Prophet Muḥammad's deeds and utterances) known as *qudsī*, or 'sacred hadiths', have a particularly relevant status, because they are those sayings of the Prophet divinely communicated to him.



root as *muḥīṭ*): only if the all embracing love comes through knowledge and respect will we escape the risk of creating walls of misunderstanding and division.

While meditating on the deep relationship between action, love and beauty, the French scholar Luc Benoist (2015: 43-45) defines knowledge as “the most unselfish and disinterested kind of love”, by exhorting us to interpret the concept of love, through an analogical transposition, as something lying beyond the “too human feeling” to which the word ‘love’ commonly refers. When quoting the famous hadith *qudsī* “I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known [so I created the world]”, he comments it as follows:

Thus, on the path of initiation, gnosis needs, in this stage, the driving force of love. The concentration of all the faculties of the heart allows their simultaneous exercise, highlighting the dangerous abstractness of pure intellectualism. Intelligence thus becomes love for the truth and love becomes intelligence of the heart or, in Sufi words, it changes into an “intelligent heart”.

Therefore, love and knowledge are meant as two crucial dimensions of the path to identity. The journey toward attaining awareness of one’s self cannot be separated from acquisition of knowledge, be it *‘ilm* or *ma’rifa*, scientific learning or gnosis, bestowed as a gift of insight and intuition. Benoist’s meditation on the ‘true’ purport of love finds a significant parallel in the words of the eighth-century Iraqi Sufi woman Rābī’a al-‘Adawiyya (d. 801), who spoke of ‘pure’ and ‘perfect’ love as a kind of love which is not out of fear of punishment or hope of reward, but is unconditionally directed to the One who is He alone worth of Love (Scattolin 2008: 84-85).

The imperative of knowledge is a transversal issue, crossing the whole tradition of spiritual thought and resonating in the Qur’ānic verses (49:13): “O humankind! We have [...] made you into tribes and families so that you may know one another”. In this perspective, the revealed message is interpreted and experienced in accord with the most innovative connotation of the Qur’ānic discourse, that is the call to “know one another” and pursue the truth, as the Algerian Sufi Shaykh Aḥmad al-‘Alawī (d. 1934) said (De Vitray-Meyerovitch 2002: 44): “He [the searcher of the Truth] makes his research the only object of his gaze”.

Finally, in Sufis’ thought, love is never an end in itself, but is a means by which human societies can consolidate the foundations of cultures, by deepening the interrelation between individuals. Among the rules as codified in al-Sulamī’s treatises, a significant place is given to the concept of respect, interpreted as reverence toward God, having a high opinion of others and being courteous to them, attaining awareness of one’s own creatural value and appreciating humanity thereof.

#### SPIRITUALITY IN ACTION



Language, love and knowledge, all participate in interlacing the threads of the society's fabric: in fact, the dynamics of their evolution imply a direct involvement of the self, not as a separate entity, but as a socially interrelated being. Fully aware of this social purport of authentic spirituality, Sufi thought on the inward dimensions of humanity entails a continuous reflection on the relationship of the subject with the world and with other subjects. The social aspect of spirituality is particularly evident in the history of Sufism, where, for instance, the mechanism of love functioned as "the essential cement for the construction of large-scale Sufi communities", as much as the transmission of knowledge from master to disciple contributed to the constitution of "communal social bodies" strongly embedded in their own historical and cultural contexts (Bashir 2011: 21). Sufism's intellectual and social aspects have always been deeply interconnected and the spiritual dimension of a culture has often shared the arena with the public and communal spheres. In a poem dedicated by the contemporary Turkish poetess Lale Müldür to the eighth-century Sufi Maryam al-Başıyya, we read (Schimmel 1998: 38): "God has many devotees who, like the rain, / if they fall to earth, turn to corn, / if they fall in the sea, / they turn to pearls".

Spirituality entails participation in life, making individuals the producers of change and cultural progress. Thus, true Sufism has not limited itself to asceticism, nor has it merely endorsed the idea of human beings projecting their existence toward the far remote horizon of an Absolute, perceived as the asymptotic object of an endless yearning. Rather, true mystics are those who *return* from their dramatic encounter with Reality, by which they have been radically transfigured,<sup>9</sup> to live among people, in a constant endeavour to communicate the fruits of their experience.

The following passage from al-Iskandarī's *Miftāḥ al-Falāḥ wa-Miṣbāḥ al-Arwāḥ* ('The Key to Salvation and the Lamp of Souls') well describes the Sufi's role in the process of contributing to human development. In the chapter "What Initiates on the Path Must Impose Upon Themselves and Practice Constantly" the author writes (1996: 125):

[...] Among the conditions imposed on the followers of this way are: that they treat people justly of their own accord [...]; that they offer assistance but not take sides; that they treat people with mercy and compassion; that they give good counsel in whatever transpires among them; and that no one among them should hand over to his companion whatever is not required by their order.

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<sup>9</sup> Like the Prophet Moses on Mount Sinai. It is interesting to note the meaningful purport of the Qur'ānic epithet of Moses as *Kalim Allāh*, where the word *kalim* means 'the person addressed' but also 'one who has been wounded'. The *kalām* or 'Word' of God linguistically implies the concept of transfiguration, in which God's speaking leaves a mark of His presence as evident as a wound, thus transforming man into a living sign of the Absolute's breaking into human history.



In his quality as a jurist of the Mālikī school of law<sup>10</sup> and as the third *murshid* ('master' or 'guide') of the Shādhilī<sup>11</sup> Sufi order, Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 1310) was fully aware of the necessity of bearing witness to the Absolute by making one's life a living testimony (*shahāda*) of the sacredness of man's creatural origin: that meant, at a social level, behaving with justice, giving good counsel and bearing the responsibility of one's own actions. Furthermore, the author calls for the necessity of transmission of learning, by adding (ibid.: 127-128): "Among their attributes: [...] They guide the lost, teach the ignorant, and alert the heedless. They neither veil themselves nor have others who veil them: all who seek them find them, and all who want them reach them". By stressing the relevance of transmission of knowledge through guidance and teaching, al-Iskandarī reveals a profoundly humanistic perspective and well expresses what could be called the 'social activism' of much Sufism, by affirming: "all who seek them find them". This passage reflects indeed the most authentic aspects of a whole Sufi tradition of thought, spurring spiritual achievement not to be left at the margins of society. The Sufi does not hide from anyone: rather, his presence must be translated into action, in which he vigorously engages. From the consciousness of responsibility arises a sort of creative tension, that elevates man to the rank of interpreter of life, the events of which he observes and experiences, being aware of his own role, on the one hand, and of the presence of a divine plan, on the other.

With this regard, I find particularly relevant the Sufi's speculations on the concept of 'time' (*waqt*), interpreted as the *now* between the past and the future, the non-recurring moment in which the Sufi should invest all his energies. On this basis, the true mystic is often called by Sufis "a son of his moment" (*ibn waqt<sup>hi</sup>*), meaning that he is wholly occupied with the present moment and that he has concern neither for the moment past nor for the moment to come. Hence, the Sufi Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī could affirm (Biagi 2010: 12, 14): "The Sufi must be aware of the significance of the moment.[...] It was said: 'Time is the most precious of all things; therefore, occupy it with the most precious things'".

Echoing al-Sulamī's words, many Sufis described the 'person of action' as the one who always has to strive towards his own self-realization while also guiding the inner realization of 'the other'. If seen in this perspective, Sufi words can be interpreted as a lively encouragement to be active makers of our lives, fully committed as both individual and collective selves. Indeed, either when dealing with spiritual themes or

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<sup>10</sup> Among the four major 'schools of Islamic jurisprudence' (*madhāhib*) the Mālikī school represents one of the largest group of Sunni Muslims. Founded by Mālik ibn Anas (d. 796), it relies on the Qur'ān and hadiths as primary sources and considers the practice of the Companions of Medina as a valid source of law (Schacht 1982).

<sup>11</sup> The Ṭarīqa ('way, order') Shādhiliyya is a Sufi order founded by Abū 'l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (d. 1258). As explained by Trimmingham (1998: 49), "Abū 'l-Ḥasan as a shaikh *sā'ih* or 'vagabond ascetic' did not himself initiate his pupils into any special rule or ritual, but his teaching was maintained by his disciples". Even though, this Sufi order exerted a great influence, especially in North Africa and Egypt, and his adepts largely contributed to Islamic literary tradition.





when addressing issues of personal and social concern, Sufi authors often highlight the lively interrelation between self-realization and the development of a social conscience. Exploring interiority, in fact, proves to be the essential foundation of any thought or action, which aims at the construction of an authentic intercultural society based on mutual dialogue and understanding.

In conclusion, if we consider some of the salient concepts in the history of Islamic mysticism, the high points of which have been examined in this paper, we can easily understand the significance of Sufism in the development of Islamic civilization and the place it held in interiorizing and deepening Islamic faith and practice (Chittick 2008). Furthermore, Sufism has manifested itself in a twofold dimension: on the one hand, it represents a universal and perennial practice of spiritual inquiry; on the other, it is a historical tradition, the prevailing aspects of which can be viewed as collective rather than private and are embedded “in the surrounding contexts of Muslim and global history” (Green 2012: XII). Finally, at a time when Islam is seen by many as a threatening and uncompromising ‘monolith’, a deeper understanding of Sufi spirituality can help to shed light on the many different facets of Islamic civilization whilst emphasizing the central role of Sufism in the constitution of ‘identities in motion’.

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