

A Short Survey of Yemeni Sufism from Its Inception up to the Thirteenth Century

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the historical conditions of Yemen's Sufi movement from the beginning of Islam up to the rise of the Rasulid dynasty in the thirteenth century. This is a very difficult task, given the lack of adequate sources and sufficient academic attention in both the East and the West. Certainly, a few sentences about the subject can be found scattered in Sufi literature at large, but a respectable study of the period's mysticism can hardly be found.¹ Thus, I will focus on the major authorities who first contributed to the ascetic movement's development, discuss why a major decline of intellectual activities occurred in many metropolises, and if the existing ascetic conditions were transformed into mystical tendencies during the ninth century due to the alleged impact of Dhu'n-Nun al-Misri (d. 860). This is followed by a brief discussion of what contributed to the revival of the country's intellectual and economic activities.

After that, I will attempt to portray the status of the major ascetics and prominent mystics credited with spreading and diffusing the so-called Islamic saintly miracles (*karamat*). The trademark of both ascetics and mystics across the centuries, this feature became more prevalent from the beginning of the twelfth century onward. I will conclude with a brief note on the most three celebrated figures of Yemen's religious and cultural history: Abu al-Ghayth ibn Jamil (d. 1253) and his rival Ahmad ibn `Alwan (d. 1266) from the mountainous area, and Muhammad ibn `Ali al-`Alawi, known as al-Faqih al-Muqaddam (d. 1256), from Hadramawt.

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An Overview

Literary evidence shows that the term *Sufism* first began to circulate during the first half of the ninth century.² The preceding period witnessed the emergence and rapid spread of various groups of Islamic ascetics (*zuhhad*) and devout individuals (*nussak*). Although standard Sufi literature often portrays the Prophet and some of his Companions as the first Sufis, the actual founder of theosophical Sufism was the Nubian Dhu'n-Nun al-Misri (d. 860).³ Sufism in Yemen, as elsewhere, started with prominent ascetic manifestations and then permeated the society and developed until it became a salient feature in the late ninth century. This feature seemed to have remained primitive and undeveloped.

Among the first ascetics and recluses were the Companions Abu Musa al-Ash`ari (d. 664), Abu Hurayrah (d. 713), and Uways al-Qarani (d. 657), whose genealogies have been traced back to Yemeni origins and whom the Sufi tradition presents as Sufis. They should not, however, be regarded as Sufis since they were unfamiliar with the Sufi concepts that became prominent in later generations. Although mystical elements were implicitly present in the Qur'an, they remained latent until the ninth century, when they became explicit – though not predominantly circulated. These Companions' attraction to asceticism was due to the fact that not only did they seek to fulfill their religious duties, but they also "paid close attention to the underlying motives of their actions and sought to impregnate them with a deeper spiritual meaning."⁴ Their objective was accomplished by scrupulous meditation on the Qur'an, a comprehensive imitation of the Prophet's piety, a meticulous examination of the inner intentions behind their deeds, a preference for poverty over wealth, and a constant chastisement of their souls as well as their bodies.

Ascetic Companions of Yemeni Pedigree

The above-mentioned ascetics are considered the earliest representatives of the Yemeni ascetic movement. After Abu Musa embraced Islam, the Prophet gave him permission to immigrate, along with some other converts, to Abyssinia, where he remained until the conquest of Khaybar in 629. Later on, he was sent to his homeland to propagate Islam; he converted more than fifty people. Upon his arrival in Madinah, the Prophet looked at his Companions and said: "People have come to you from Yemen. They are the most amicable and gentle-hearted of people. Faith is of Yemen, and wisdom is Yemeni."⁵

At the battle of Siffin between `Ali and Mu`awiyah in 657, a majority of the combatants trusted him to serve as an impartial arbiter with `Amr ibn al-`As (d. 663). But because he was a prominent member of the people described by the Prophet as “gentle-hearted,” `Amr outwitted him and his political career came to an end.⁶ This should not be taken as a defect in his character, since he was attempting to implement the bona fide morals of Islam and was representing the most inner doctrine of the ascetic (*zuhd*) movement regardless of the outcome. With the help of `Amr’s politics, Mu`awiyah prevailed. Abu Musa spent the rest of his life in Makkah worshipping God and abstaining from worldly pleasures. His exemplary piety and asceticism were inspired by his interaction with the Prophet and his cousin Imam `Ali.

Abu Hurayrah (d. 713), another of the ascetic movement’s early representatives, was the major propagator of the Prophet’s words and deeds. When some Companions asked about his ample transmission of prophetic hadiths, he told them that one day when the Prophet was preaching, he had asked: “Who will lay down his cloth until I finish my talk and then will grab it to himself so that he will not forget anything of what he heard from me?” Abu Hurayrah spread out his cloth, the Prophet preached to him, and Abu Hurayrah subsequently wrapped himself up in it, thus assuring the faithful remembrance of what he had heard. He then defended his position by swearing by God that if it were not only for a warning verse in the Qur’an, “Those who conceal what We revealed of the proofs and guidance after We have clarified it for the people, those [whom] God will curse and the cursers will curse them [too] (2:159),⁷ he would not have preached anything at all. Abu Hurayrah’s profound interest in the prophetic hadith convinced him to follow an ascetic path of life; his permanent presence with the Prophet was the major reason behind his scrupulousness, piety, and asceticism.

Alongside Abu Musa and Abu Hurayrah, one should mention the celebrated ascetic and recluse Uways al-Qarani (d. 657), whom the sources describe as a “friend of God” (*wali*). The evidence of this “friendship” (*wilayah*) is unmistakable, as the Prophet ordered `Umar ibn al-Khattab and `Ali ibn Abi Talib to look for Uways and ask for his blessings and supplication.⁸ This statement from the Prophet meant that Uways was one of those unruly men to whom God listens and responds. One can deduce his importance from the hadiths: not only was he considered a Companion, even though he had never seen the Prophet, but his uncompromising spirituality also raised him to the level of a very special Companion. The Prophet’s fore-

knowledge of him is in itself a miracle (*karamah*). What is more revealing about his character is the Prophet's foretelling that God will honor Uways' intercession in the Hereafter for as many people as those belonging to the two Arab tribes of Rabi`ah and Mudar to enter Paradise.⁹

Islamic Influence on Sufism

The distinctive features of the ascetic tendencies of the seventh century pertain to many, if not all, Companions, including those of Yemeni pedigree. The characteristics that unified all of them were fasting, abstaining from meat and wealth, and wearing coarse wool.¹⁰ This last aspect became a dominant trademark of the ninth century, so much so that later exponents of the Sufi movement considered it a major definition of *Sufism*. This explains why later Sufi writers tend to tie the Prophet and his Companions to the Sufi movement.

The ascetic movement in Yemen after the ninth century was a continuation of the ascetic tendencies inherited over generations and can be traced back to the pre-Islamic period. In addition, the Qur'an itself helped promote the mystical dimensions that encouraged the Yemeni and many other ascetics and devout people from all over the Islamic realm to spread and partake in asceticism's general development. Although mystical tendencies emerged in the ninth century, they remained at the individualistic level and never gained popular recognition. The influence of Islam on the Sufi movement can be seen in the acts of penitence, self-renunciation, self-purification, self-improvement, meticulous meditation on the Qur'an and Sunnah, God-consciousness, and exemplary piety. These pious features are considered attitudes conducive to the mystical goal, even though they remained confined and undeveloped in the early centuries of Islam. One of the most celebrated passages of the Qur'an, one that attracted many ascetic Yemenis to embark on the Sufi way of life, is the so-called "verse of light," which became a subject of constant meditation:

God is the light of the Heavens and the Earth. The likeness of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp, the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star, kindled from a blessed tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West whose oil wellnigh would shine, even if no fire touched it; Light upon Light; God guides to His Light whom He will. And God strikes similitudes for men, and God has knowledge of everything. In houses God has permitted to be raised up, and His Name to be commemorated therein; therein glorifying Him, in the morning and the evenings,

are men whom neither trade nor business diverts from the remembrance of God and to perform the prayer, and to pay the alms, fearing a day when hearts and eyes shall be turned about, that God may recompense them for their fairest works and give them increase of His bounty; and God provides whomsoever He will, without reckoning.¹¹

There are many other verses, too numerous to be mentioned here, that prove that the Qur'an played a significant role in shaping the Sufis' doctrines in general and the Yemeni mystics in particular.

The second major reference is the prophetic hadith. Here we will cite the most important hadith, one that has attracted plenty of mystics to meditate and adopt certain creedal positions, and is an important reference used by Yemeni mystics to display their ecstatic outbursts:

Allah Almighty has said: "Whosoever shows enmity to a friend of Mine, I shall be at war with him. My servant does not draw near to Me with anything more loved by Me than the religious duties I have imposed upon him, and My servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory works so that I shall love him. When I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes. Were he to ask [something] of Me, I would surely give it to him; were he to ask Me for refuge, I would surely grant it to him."¹²

Yemeni mystics launched their spiritual journeys from these sources, and such texts were the foundation for the development and growth of Islamic mysticism in that land. They talked about such essential Sufi states and stations (*al-ahwal wa al-maqamat*) as God's love (*al-hubb fi Allah*), annihilation (*fana'*), self-survival (*baqa'*), and self-contentment (*rida*). In short, the Qur'an has made a significant contribution to the establishment as well as the development of mystical doctrines across centuries, including our own time.

Ascetic Successors of Yemeni Pedigree

In the second Islamic generation, that of the Successors, one witnesses several Yemeni ascetics whose exemplary piety is undisputed. Among these is the most famous ascetic: Abu `Abd Allah `Amr ibn Maymun al-Awdi (d. 694), who was also a major hadith transmitter. He accompanied a number of the Companions and narrated hadiths on their authority. There is no doubt that his asceticism was influenced by their extreme piety. Traditional Sufi literature has always considered all of the Companions to be ascetics and

“friends of God.” Although al-Awdi is counted among the Successors, his spirituality elevates him to the rank of the Companions because he followed in their footsteps and paid no significant attention to the material worldly life.

Tawus ibn Kaysan (d. 724), another Successor of the devotional type of piety, was known for his ascetic tendencies and his negligence of wealth. Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1201) reports on al-Nu`man ibn al-Zubayr’s authority that Muhammad ibn Yusuf and Ayyub ibn Yahya, two leading politicians during the caliphate of al-Walid ibn `Abd al-Malik (d. 714), sent 500 dinars to Tawus, promising the envoy that the emir would reward him if Tawus would accept it. The envoy, unable to convince Tawus to take the money, eventually took advantage of the latter’s negligence by putting the money in a corner of the house and claiming that Tawus had taken it. The two politicians remained silent for a while; but when they learned something unpleasant about Tawus, they sent another man to retrieve the money. Tawus told them: “I did not take anything.” The two politicians knew that Tawus was honest, but wanted to confirm their knowledge by sending the former envoy back to ask about the money. Tawus replied: “Did I take anything from you?” The envoy said: “No.” Then Tawus asked: “Have you left the money in the house?” The envoy pointed to the corner and saw it lying there, enveloped in cobwebs. He took the money back and returned it to the politicians.¹³

This story reveals Tawus’ ascetic life and exemplary piety. First, he abstained from worldly pleasures by nature and, second, he would have never accepted any money from the authorities because of the popular belief that such money is always contaminated.

Such devotional features were reflected in the lives of all of the central figures who made up the first and second generations of Islam. Thus, most of their biographies are replicated in some way or another, or at least share the same ascetic features: love for contemplating the Qur’an, rejection of wealth, and introspection – all accompanied by an uncompromising piety. The following Yemeni ascetics share all of these features and seem to have held the same revered rank: Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 734), al-Mughirah ibn Hakim al-San`ani, al-Hakam ibn Aban al-`Adani (d. 770), Dirgham ibn Wa’il al-Hadrami, al-Khansa’ bint Khidam, and others. Their distinctive devotional type of piety did not cross the borderline that separates asceticism from mysticism. Known as renouncers of worldly delights and devout people, they lived pious lives and engaged in meticulous contemplation of the Qur’an and the Prophet’s exemplary deeds.

The Factors behind Mysticism's Decline

To a certain degree, the spiritual period in Yemen (between the seventh century up to the end of the tenth), was characterized by a tremendous deterioration in intellectual activities for the following factors. First, the international trade routes apparently moved from Yemen and the Red Sea to Iraq and the Persian Gulf during the eighth century and remained there until about the tenth century. This development caused an economic and cultural depression. Waves of emigration, especially in the seventh century (due to the Arab conquests) also impoverished its cultural and political atmosphere by lessening the activities of local communities. While the early community of Islam was extending itself to Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Khurasan, and elsewhere, the Yemeni state became isolated and, due to its shrinking economic resources, entirely neglected.¹⁴

Some historians and Yemeni chronicles depict this period as a time of intellectual and cultural stagnancy and apathy. Some contemporary Yemeni scholars have attempted to link the ninth-century worshippers and pious people, who were presented as ascetics and devout people in medieval biographies, to the Sufi movement.¹⁵ This is not accurate, however, since there are no indications of any doctrines, literature, or even theoretical and practical concepts that were in any way representative of Sufi rituals.

One can deduce from the medieval sources that ideas and discussions in Yemen after the ninth century started to shift slowly and gradually away from behaviors revolving around renunciation of worldly pleasures and toward disseminating profound mystical ideas. This transformation was caused, first, by assimilating Arabic culture and, second, by accepting some foreign cultural notions that had begun to spread over the Islamic world, including Yemen. The translation movement from Greek into Arabic during the early `Abbasid era was a major factor in developing classical Islamic notions into more sophisticated doctrines. For the first time, one hears of divine love and longing, as can be seen in the mystical life of Rabi`ah al-`Adawiyyah (d. 801) and Dhu'n-Nun al-Misri (d. 860). Evidence of this nature can be found, for instance, in the books of the medieval Yemeni hagiographer `Abd Allah ibn As`ad al-Yafi`i (d. 1366), particularly in his *Rawd al-Rayahin*.

Between Asceticism and Mysticism

There is no big difference between asceticism and mysticism, for the former is an early stage of self-preparation that leads to the latter. It is very rare for

a well-recognized and established mystic to go back to asceticism. On the contrary, an ascetic may strive hard to reach the stage of mysticism. Sometimes it may become very difficult to separate these two concepts because they are so interrelated. The prevailing notion in Sufi literature, however, is that asceticism is merely a phase of long-lasting mysticism.

ʿAbd Allah ibn Asʿad al-Yafiʿi reports a story that probably could have been the basis of the early crystallization of Yemeni asceticism's gradual transformation into mysticism. This is presented in the form of a vision influenced by Dhu'n-Nun al-Misri's visit to Yemen in the ninth century. His desire to meet a certain person in Yemen who was reported to have some knowledge of mystical ideas is apparently evidence of Dhu'n-Nun's mystical mind as well as evidence of the emergence of mystical notions in Yemen. Al-Yafiʿi reports that Dhu'n-Nun said:

It was mentioned to me that a man from the masters (*sadah*) of Yemen had surpassed the God-conscious people and exceeded ardent worshippers (*mujtahidun*). He is known to the people and described as sage, wise, modest, and humble. Dhu'n-Nun said: "I went on a pilgrimage to the house of God (*al-bayt al-haram*), and when I finished the pilgrimage, I and some people who were seeking blessing like me went to visit him in order to hear something of his words and benefit from his exhortation. There was a young man with us, who has the characteristic of the righteous (*salihun*) and the look of God-conscious. He is pale without sickness, bleary-eyed without ophthalmia. He loves solitary place (*khalwah*) and is intimate with loneliness ... He was with us until we reached Yemen. We asked about the Shaykh's house and were led to it. Then, when we reached him, the young man started talking to the Shaykh ... and asked him: 'What is the sign of consciousness of God, may He be exalted?' He replied: 'God-consciousness secures you from every fear save the fear of Him.' The young man was scared and fell down in a trance. When he recovered, he said: "God bless you. When does the servant make sure of his consciousness of God?' He replied: 'If he puts himself in the worldly life like a patient [who is] sick.' ... The young man cried aloud until we thought his soul had departed. Then he [the young man] said: 'God bless you. What is the sign of the love of God, may He be exalted?' He replied: 'Oh my dear boy, the rank of God's love is high.' The young man said: 'I would like you to describe it to me.' He said: 'Oh my dear boy, the lovers of God, may He be exalted – [although] their hearts were opened [they] – watched by the light of their hearts to the Majesty of the Greatness of the Beloved God. Their souls become spirits, their hearts become veils, their minds become heavenly and travel among the rows of the eminent angels and see those issues with certitude and

observation. They worshipped Him as far as they could; [they would not serve God out of] desire for His reward and fear of His punishment.' The young man then cried out loud and immediately died."¹⁶

If the quoted story is authentic and accurate, then the border separating asceticism from mysticism seems to have been crossed. However, the evidence is unsatisfactory and one should not place too much weight on this story because it is an isolated event and because there was no subsequent dissemination of Sufi ideas after his visit. Whether Dhu'n-Nun's visit was due to his escape from Caliph al-Ma'mun's Inquisition over the createdness of the Qur'an or to his efforts to establish the foundation of Sufism in Yemen is of no great significance.¹⁷ Despite his eagerness to find out the mysteries behind an anonymous Yemeni shaykh who, in his eyes, was qualified and capable of promulgating Sufi thought, one sees no development of these ideas. Thus, the claim that Dhu'n-Nun influenced Yemeni Sufism cannot be documented. In addition, asceticism remained primitive, in the strict sense of the word, until the emergence of celebrated Sufis during the thirteenth century.

Another attempt to search for links to the early ideas that could have contributed to Yemen's nascent Sufism would be the study of Ahmad ibn `Abd Allah al-Razi's (d. 1068) *Tarikh Madinat San`a*. In it, one finds a group of ascetics who lived during the eighth and ninth centuries but who apparently did not develop any mystical ideas. One of their members, a certain Muhammad ibn Bistam al-San`ani, was reported to have earned his living from licit means through hard labor. According to al-Razi, this man used to spend part of his earnings specifically for his bread (which was made of barley) and donate the rest to the poor.¹⁸

During these two centuries, one finds other names in connection with the jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and hadith literature that can be found in separate biographies. Some of these scholars engaged in asceticism, but doing so was part of general Islamic piety. In a similar vein, the eleventh century saw a new wave of Yemeni ascetics, most of whom came from the plateaus paralleling the coastal areas of Tihamah and Ta`izz. One representative of these regions is the venerable recluse Abu Muhammad Sawd ibn al-Kumayt (or al-Kamit) (d. 1044). The medieval biographer al-Sharji (d. 1487) states that Sawd renounced earthly delights and preoccupied himself with spiritual knowledge (*ma`rifah*).¹⁹ Every year he spent the revenue earned from his land in the service of God as a sign of piety and renunciation of the material world. Some of his descendants became well-known scholars, ascetics, and recluses.

Up to this point, no concrete information explains the development of the Sufi ideas that emerged in the ninth century through the anonymous Yemeni mystic whom Dhu'n-Nun had come to see. Those ideas carrying mystical elements remained in a narrow circle voiced by an individual. The general impression is that the intellectual activities were deteriorating due to Yemen's political isolation and economic depression, which, in turn, resulted in the isolation of Sufism. Nevertheless, the twelfth century witnessed a group of intellectuals who were widely known for combining Islamic jurisprudence and asceticism. Their biographies can be found in the books of *tabaqat* and hagiographies.²⁰ The reason for this combination is that asceticism appeared to have been classified under other Islamic sciences.

Moreover, ascetic tendencies had been growing quietly within Islamic communities, and the ongoing debates and discussions were dominated by juridical-minded scholars, one of whom was the distinguished Zayd ibn `Abd Allah al-Yafa'i (d. 1120).²¹ According to al-Janadi (d. 1331), this scholar started his early religious education in al-Janad and traveled to Makkah to broaden his knowledge of Shafi'i *fiqh* under al-Tabari (d. after 1106) and al-Bandaniji (d. 1106).²² Upon his return, he attracted large crowds of disciples – in excess of 300 – who flocked from far and wide to join his circle. He was the first person to bring the books of Abu Ishaq al-Shirazi (d. 1083), such as *Al-Muhadhdhabb* and *Al-Bayan* (which deal with Shafi'i *fiqh*) to Yemen.

During this time, the land's political atmosphere was swayed by the ongoing rivalry among the three main theological and juridical schools: the Zaydis, the Isma'ilis, and the Sunnis. Al-Sharji mentions that al-Yafa'i abstained from socializing with the authorities and instead engaged in a worship of God so profound that he could perform miracles (*karamat*). For instance, when he intended to leave his house during the quiet hours of the night in order to go to the mosque, the door would open itself without assistance, just like the modern electronic doors that open automatically when they "sense" someone coming. He would pray for a while and then go back home in the same manner.²³ Al-Janadi asserted that his tomb became a site of visitation.²⁴

Another worshipper and devout person of that time is `Abd Allah ibn Yazid al-Qasimi (d. 1131), nicknamed Abu Sa'id. Authentic transmitters reported that he saw the Night of Determination (*laylat al-qadr*) and asked God to provide him with licit income (*rizq halal*) and pious children. God responded to his supplication and granted him, after quite some time, a farm of bees in which honey was extraordinarily plentiful and pious progeny.²⁵

The second half of the twelfth century witnessed the emergence of a multitude of ascetics, some of whom were familiar with basic mystical elements. This contributed to the nascent Sufi movement's development. Abu al-`Abbas Ahmad ibn Abi al-Khayr, better known as al-Sayyad (d. 1183), is one of the best representatives of this group, because he was considered not only a "friend of God" like the classical ascetics, but also a spiritual mystic. In his early life, as-Sayyad was one of the vulgar populace in Zabid. His story of Sufi conversion reminds us of an earlier Sufi, al-Fudayl ibn `Iyad (d. 803), and of a much later Yemeni Sufi, the celebrated Abu al-Ghayth ibn Jamil (d. 1253). Each of these Sufis shares a common feature of the Sufi conversion narrative, but differs individually in details. At the age of twenty, al-Sayyad is reported to have received a pious vision. While he was sleeping, someone said to him: "Stand up, O Sayyad, and pray." He got up immediately and started to learn how to perform the ablution and prayer. He eventually pursued the most rigorous forms of worship and piety.²⁶

Later on, as a sign of his sincere piety, al-Sayyad frequently experienced the Sufi state of annihilation (*fana'*) in God. For instance, he once lay in the desert for several days in the state of annihilation, causing the wind to blow dust over his body and allow the grass to grow on it.²⁷ Al-Sharji states that al-Sayyad used to praise the coastal areas, especially the land between the two mosques of al-Mabrak and al-Mukha, as well as that between the two mosques of Mu`adh and al-Fazah, since these were, in his view, resorts for pious people (*salihun*) and spiritual places for constant worship. Similarly, he praised Kamaran Island for its sanctity and for being a sanctuary for righteous worshippers of God (*`ibad Allah al-salihin*).

When al-Sayyad moved to Zabid, he became famous for miracles. One of these is reported by an anonymous righteous man who came with a group of people to visit him. They found him living with a young man and inquired whether he was his student. Al-Sayyad did not reply. The group, then, asked the young man, who answered affirmatively. Turning toward al-Sayyad sneeringly, they exclaimed: "Now you have disciples!" He got angry and said: "Yes." The group challenged him to use his spiritual influence to command the young man to walk on the water. He did so, and the young man carried out the spiritual order. The men were stunned and begged the young man to come back. But he did not. They then begged al-Sayyad to call him back. He called out "Come back," and the young man returned. The visitors deeply regretted their behavior and asked for forgiveness, which he granted.²⁸

Al-Sayyad frequently preached mystical ideas. Once, he was asked: “Who is higher, the Gnostic (*al-`arif*) or the Lover (*al-muhibb*)?” he replied: “The Gnostic, because the Lover is preoccupied with love while the Gnostic is preoccupied with the Beloved (*al-mahbub*).” His student Ibrahim ibn Bashshar al-`Adani, whose date of death is unknown, compiled a manuscript that contains al-Sayyad’s biography and miracles. Before joining al-Sayyad and benefiting from his friendship, al-`Adani had been a follower of the Qadiri order and had received the Sufi cloak (*al-khirqah*) directly from `Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166), the order’s founder.²⁹ Al-`Adani, who followed in his master’s footsteps and became a celebrated Sufi in his own right, could also perform miracles.

The Factors behind Mysticism’s Revival

Since the nascent Sufi movement began to flourish during and after al-Sayyad’s time, it is important to discuss its contributing factors, particularly those belonging to the intellectual and cultural life in Yemen after its long stagnancy. First, the return of international trade routes to Yemeni ports and the Red Sea helped disseminate books and attracted scholars to reside in the land’s major cities. As a result of the return of the vital commercial route, Yemen’s isolation began to disappear and its economic resources started to increase consistently. Second, one of the main reasons for the revival of intellectual activity was the rise of local Yemeni states, among them the Ziadids (818-1018), Yu`firids (847-997), Najahids (1021-1156), Sulayhids (1047-1138), Sulaymanids (c. 1069-c. 1173), Zuray`ids (1080-1173), the Hamdanid sultans (1099-1173), and the Mahdids (1159-73), who flourished during the Ayyubids’ reign (1173-1228). All of this culminated with the most brilliant period, that of the Rasulids, which lasted for over two centuries (1228-1454). These states contributed to the development of local resources, relative stability, and the encouragement of Islamic and scientific learning.

Third, the resulting interstate political competition can be considered another major reason that inspired the scientific and intellectual movement to flourish. The rivalry among the three main juridical and theological schools (*madhahib*), namely, the Isma`ilis, the Zaydis, and the Sunnis, was quite severe and, on occasion, could be atrocious.³⁰ Supporters of each *madhahab* tried to expand geographically as well as demographically at the expense of their rivals. Thus, one can see the Zaydi state in the northern part of the country, particularly in Sa`dah, and the Banu Hatim as rulers of the

historical capital, San`a'. The Zuray`id state, located in the southern coastal area along the Indian ocean, leaned toward Isma`ili teachings. Among the independent states we find the first Isma`ili dynasty, which was founded by the two missionaries `Ali ibn al-Fadl (d. 914) and al-Hasan ibn Hawshab (d. 915).³¹ The second, and perhaps most powerful, Isma`ili state was established by `Ali ibn Muhammad al-Sulayhi (reigned 1047-66), who unified Yemen for the first time. In addition, we see the emergence of the Sulaymani *ashraf* north of Najran and as far as Harad in the south of Tihamah.

Finally, one should not overlook the two Sunni states, the Banu Mahdi (1159-73) and the Najahids (1021-1156), who fought constantly with both the Zaydis and the Isma`ilis. Such a chaotic and unstable political environment paved the way for the powerful Sunni Ayyubids' (1173-1228) invasion of Yemen. Their arrival from Syria and Egypt was a major, if not the only, factor behind the subsequent flourishing of Sufism. The Ayyubids, as elsewhere, supported Sufism in Yemen by building Sufi lodges throughout the country. The Rasulids followed in their footsteps and built colleges, mosques, and Sufi institutions. Erudite themselves, the Rasulids patronized scholars from far and wide and encouraged Sufi debates at their palaces. As a result, the progress of mystical doctrines followed by the establishment of Sufi institutions (*arbitah* or *zawayah*) was assured.

It is true that the two branches of Shi`ism (viz., the Zaydis and the Isma`ilis) were hostile toward the Sufi movement in general, particularly in the areas of their hegemonic influence. Before the Ayyubid campaign, however, such hostility had been scanty and marginal. It became noticeable and prominent only after the thirteenth century, a period that is beyond the scope of this paper.

The Diffusion of Miracles

`Ali ibn `Umar ibn Muhammad al-Ahdal (d. 1205), a major mystic of the Ayyubid period, is believed to have been the first person in his family to embrace mystical doctrines. His grandfather, al-Ahdal, had emigrated from Iraq with two cousins to disseminate Islamic teachings in Yemen and Hadramawt. It is important to note that all of them were erudite and famous for their Sufi learning and saintly miracles. The grandfather settled in the valley (*wadi*) of Siham. One of his cousins went to the *wadi* of Surdud, where he became the ancestor of Banu al-Qudaymi; the other one headed for Hadramawt, where he became the ancestor of Al Ba`Alawi. They are, therefore, the founders of most of Yemen's Sayyid families.³² The grandson was

noted for his saintly miracles and was one of the main teachers of the celebrated Sufi Abu al-Ghayth ibn Jamil, whom we shall meet shortly.

In regard to his miracles, al-Sharji reports that al-Ahdal predicted that a certain man living in his village, one who served the authorities, would die that night. The man and his family spent the night in agony. Some people told them to give alms so that God might rescue him. They gave fifteen dinars, a lot of money at that time. In the morning, the man came to pray the morning prayer with the shaykh, and the people were waiting to hear the shaykh's words. Al-Ahdal sent one of his disciples to the man's house, instructing him to raise the straw mat upon which the man had slept and speak to the thing beneath it. The disciple, finding a large snake, asked it to answer the shaykh. The snake followed the disciple to the shaykh's house and laid its head on the shaykh's prayer rug. Al-Ahdal put his hand on its head and said: "The appointed time of death (*ajal*) was decreed tonight upon this man, but fifteen dinars in alms was paid and God has extended his age for fifteen more years. However, his destiny will be yours and yours will be his." After fifteen years, the same snake killed the man while he was irrigating his land.

When we look back at this miracle, we have to remember that it took place at a time when miracles were eulogized and thus should not be judged by our contemporary standards. Moreover,

The hagiographer has to employ his rhetorical skills to convey how he wanted the saint to be perceived. If the resulting image accorded with the collective recollection of his community and met religious expectations, it could be incorporated into the body of tradition. Within this hermeneutical circle, rhetoric, politics, and local opinion all played a significant part in constructing the image of a saint.³³

The early thirteenth century is characterized by the multitude of mystics to whom God granted the ability to perform miracles in reference to the constant demands of their communities. One of them, a certain `Isa ibn Iqbal al-Hattar (d. 1209), was known as Ibn Jamil's second teacher and is portrayed in medieval hagiographical sources as a man of numerous miracles and Sufi unveiling (*al-kashf*). In one instance, a whore approached him for his blessings. A single glance of al-Hattar caused her to repent immediately. Soon thereafter, al-Hattar married her to one of his disciples. On her wedding day, one of the country's emirs (a former client) sent her two bottles of wine to mock the event. As soon as the envoy arrived, al-Hattar took the bottles and poured their contents into the porridge; the wine was transformed into ghee

and honey. He then asked the envoy to eat with them in order to show him how God's invisible hand had transformed the essence of the material objects. He did not mention that this had happened due to his spiritual influence. After hearing his envoy's account, the emir came to the shaykh and apologized in person for his misbehavior.³⁴

In general, all of the mystics of this century are credited with performing miracles and Sufi unveiling (*mukashafah*), which were dominant features of the age. There was no single famous mystic who had not performed a miracle or said something miraculous – or at least had predicted that something would happen in the future. Exemplary mystics include Abu `Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr al-Hakami (d. 1220) and Muhammad ibn Husayn al-Bajali (d. 1224), who were known in medieval biographies as “the two people of the village of `Awajah” (*sahibay `awajah*) because of their miracles and spiritual influence. These were like a pair of compasses; if one of them was mentioned, the other would come to the mind automatically. Although their names were intertwined, inseparable, and connected to each other, each of them had his own identity and mystical miracles.

Due to the long list of Sufis who contributed to this nascent Sufism, I shall conclude here with the three major representatives of the period, two of whom are connected to each other, especially in the medieval sources: Abu al-Ghayth ibn Jamil (d. 1253) and Ahmad ibn `Alwan (d. 1266). These two Sufis are celebrated, well recognized in Yemeni literary and religious history, and have been credited with founding the two Sufi orders named after them: al-Ghaythiyyah and al-`Alwaniyyah. Unfortunately, these orders are now extinct, with the exception of the litanies and spiritual poems found in Ibn `Alwan's writings. Some adherents of other Sufi orders, particularly the al-Shadhiliyyah, still recite some of these litanies in their private and public gatherings, but not as part of the distinctive `Alwani brotherhood.³⁵

These two Sufis are very important not only for their own time, but also for Yemen's religious, cultural, intellectual, and political history in general. Both of them contributed significantly to the advancement of the Sufi ideas of their age and were instrumental in mediating conflicts between rulers and powerful tribal leaders. In addition to their political contributions, they protected the masses from unjust tax policies, paid close attention to the underlying motives of their actions, and sought to impregnate them with profound spiritual meanings. Eventually, they were recognized as well-known Sufis who would perform physical as well as spiritual saintly miracles.

The third representative is Muhammad ibn `Ali al-`Alawi, known as al-Faqih al-Muqaddam (d. 1256), a renowned Sufi from Hadramawt whose genealogy goes back to Imam `Ali.³⁶ His significance springs from his status as a charismatic leader at a time when Hadramawt was torn by constant tribal fights. He convened with the descendants of the Sayyid clans, advising them to abandon the arms they carried all the time and to join him in the pursuit of religious and moral values. His spiritual path resembles that of his ancestor Ja`far al-Sadiq (d. 795), who preferred mystical quietism to a rebellious attitude when dealing with unjust authorities. Al-Faqih al-Muqaddam founded Hadramawt's first Sufi order, the `Alawi *tariqah*, and served as its first pole (*qutb*). This *tariqah* still exists.³⁷

After the time of these three representatives, there was a rapid growth of Sufi institutions, better known as Sufi orders (*ḥuruq*). The status of the Sufi movement during and beyond the Rasulid period requires a separate study and is thus beyond the scope of this article.

Conclusion

Prior to the thirteenth century, Yemen's intellectual and cultural life was characterized by asceticism instead of Sufism. The term *Sufism* appears to have begun circulating around the ninth century; however, it did not develop until the beginning of the thirteenth century. The ascetic movement, which has widely been seen as primitive, straightforward, and exemplified by the renunciation of worldly life and mundane affairs, paved the way for the emergence of mysticism. Nonetheless, Islam played a significant role in motivating and encouraging local asceticism and, hence, in adding a spiritual dimension to the mystical path.

My investigation of the ascetic traditions' transformation into mystical tendencies has been quite accurate, since we have not seen any development of Dhu'n-Nun al-Misri's alleged influence on Yemen's primitive Sufism. It should be noted, however, that asceticism and mysticism are related; in fact, occasionally one finds them quite inseparable. Surely, the discussion of the factors that contributed to Islamic mysticism's decline in Yemen is of interest. We have already seen how other factors (e.g., the transference of international trade routes from the Yemeni coastal areas to Iraq and Iran) caused a significant decline in the Yemenis' Islamic intellectual activities. In addition, we have observed how its subsequent revival was caused not only by the return of the trade routes, but also by the emergence and continuity of independent Yemeni states. Furthermore, we must

not forget that the Zaydis and Isma`ilis were constant opponents, except occasionally, of the Sufi movement. But this became obvious only after the thirteenth century.

The real establishment of Sufism in Yemen started with the Ayyubids' arrival, for they both encouraged the nascent Sufi movement and built Islamic centers of learning, colleges, and Sufi lodges. Their lieutenants, the Rasulids, followed in their footsteps and went further by inviting prominent Sufis to their palaces for spiritual debates and Sufi concerts. The Ayyubid period is considered the most brilliant in medieval Yemeni history.

Endnotes

1. An exception is Alexander Kynsh's *Ibn `Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York, 1999). Although it is an invaluable study, it only focuses on the thirteenth century and thereafter. The second exception is *Al-Suffiyah wa al-Fuqaha' fi al-Yaman* (San`a: Maktabat al-Jil al-Jadid, 1979). However, the author provides no details about the subject, incomplete profiles of early Yemeni Sufis, and lists of names with no description. The works of al-Janadi, Ibn Samura, and al-Sharji deal with hagiography only, as opposed to engaging a Sufi literature, as is the case in western academia. Despite the inadequacy, we nevertheless used this material.
2. Alexander Kynsh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden: E. J. Brill: 2000), 5.
3. Christopher Melchert, "The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C. E.," *Studia Islamica* 83 (1996): 57. See also *ibid.*
4. Kynsh, *Islamic Mysticism*, 6.
5. Ibn Samurah al-Ja`di, *Tabaqat Fuqaha' al-Yaman*, ed. Fu'ad Sayyid (Cairo: Matba`at al-Sunnah al-Muhammadiyah, 1957), 5. Cf. Robert Stookey, *Yemen* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1978), 29.
6. *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, "Abu Musa al-Ash`ari," fourth impression (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995); henceforth *SIE* 4th.
7. `Abd al-Wahhab al-Sha`rani, *Al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*, eds. Ahmad Abd al-Rahim al-Sa`ih and Tawfiq Ali Wahbah (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqafah al-Diniyyah, 2005), 1:49. Cf. Khalid Muhammad Khalid, *Rijal hawl al-Rasul* (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al Hadithah, 1965), 4:38-39.
8. Abu al-Faraj `Abd ar-Rahman al-Jawzi, *Sifat al-Safwah* (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1992), 2:24-32. See also Ahmad al-Sharji, *Tabaqat al-Khawass: Ahl al-Sidq wa al-Ikhlās* (San`a: al-Dar al-Yamaniyyah li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi', 1986) 109-14.
9. Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, trans. Ella Landau-Tasseron (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 39:207-08 and 266.

10. Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, trans. Andras and Ruth Hamori (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 131.
11. Qur'an 24:35-36. I selectively depended upon the following translations: A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: A Touchstone Book, 1996); Ahmad `Ali, *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Dyed Vickar Ahmad, *English Translation of the Message of the Qur'an*, 2d ed. (Lombard, IL: Book of Signs Foundations, 2006).
12. Yahya ibn Sharf al-Din al-Nawawi, *An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith*, 2d ed., trans. Ezzedin Ibrahim and Dennys Johnson-Davies (Damascus: Dar al-Qur'an al-Karim, 1977), 118.
13. Ibn al-Jawzi, *Sifat al-Safwah*, 1:506. Cf. Ahmad ibn `Abd Allah al-Razi Abu al-`Abbas, *Tarikh Madinat San`a'*, ed. Dr. Husayn ibn `Abd Allah al-`Amri, 3d ed. (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1989), 359.
14. Muhammad Rida Hasan al-Dujayli, *Al-Hayah al-Fikriyah fi al-Yaman fi al-Qarn al-Sadis al-Hijri* (Basra: Markaz Dirasat al-Khalij al-`Arabi, University of Basra, 1985), 215-17. Cf. Mustafa, Shakir, *Al-Tarikh al-`Arabi wa al-Mu'arrikhun*, 1st ed. (Beirut: Dar al-`Ilm li al-Malayyin, 1979), 2:318-22. See also 1:135. Cf. `Abd al-Karim Sa`id, *Qadaya wa Ishkaliyat al-Taswwuf `ind Ahmad ibn `Alwan* (San`a': Maktabat Murad, 1997), 34-35.
15. See `Abd Allah al-Hibshi, *Al-Sufiyah wa al-Fuqaha' fi al-Yaman* (San`a': Maktabat al-Jil al-Jadid, 1979), 9-10. See also `Abd al-Karim Sa`id, *Qadaya wa Ishkaliyat* (San`a': Maktabat Murad, 1997), 44.
16. `Abd Allah ibn As`ad al-Yafi'i, *Rawd al-Rayahin fi Hikayat al-Salihin*, 2d ed. (Cairo: Matba`at Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1955), 43-45. Cf. Sa`id, *Qadaya wa Ishkaliyat*, 44.
17. Al-Sayyid Abu Dayf al-Madani, *Dhu'n-Nun al-Misri*, 1st ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1973), 53; Sa`id, *Qadaya wa Ishkaliyat*, 44. See also Muhammad Jalal Sharaf, *Al-Tasawwuf al-Islami: Madarisuh wa Nazariyatuh* (Beirut: Dar al-`Ulum al-`Arabiyyah, 1990), 61.
18. Ahmad ibn `Abd Allah al-Razi, *Tarikh Madinat San`a'*, ed. Husayn ibn `Abd Allah al-`Amri, 3d ed. (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1989), 343. Cf. al-Hibshi, *Al-Sufiyah wa al-Fuqaha' fi al-Yaman*, 12.
19. Al-Sharji, *Tabaqat al-Khawass*, 150.
20. See Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Janadi, *Al-Suluk fi Tabaqat al-`Ulama' wa al-Muluk*, ed. Muhammad `Ali al-Akwa`, vol. 1. (San`a': Wizarat al-`Ilam wa al-Thaqafah, 1983); Cf. Ahmad al-Sharji, *Tabaqat al-Khawass*, 150.
21. He is different from al-Yafi'i, the author of *Rawd al-Rayahin*.
22. Al-Janadi, *Al-Suluk fi Tabaqat*, 310.
23. Al-Sharji, *Tabaqat al-Khawass*, 138.
24. Al-Janadi, *Al-Suluk fi Tabaqat*, 310.
25. Al-Sharji, *Tabaqat al-Khawass*, 188.
26. *Ibid.*, 64.

27. Ibid., 65.
28. Ibid., 66.
29. Ibid., 68.
30. `Abd al-`Al Ahmad, *Banu Rasul wa Banu Tahir* (Alexandria: al-Hay'at al-`Ammah li al-Kutub al-Misriyyah, 1980), 24.
31. Husayn ibn Fayd Allah al-Hamdani, with Hasan Sulayman Mahmud al-Juhani, *Al-Sulayhiyun wa al-Harakah al-Fātimīyah fī al-Yaman* (Yemen: Wizarat al-ʿIlam wa al-Thaqafah, 1955; reprinted at Damascus: Dar al-Mukhtar, n.d.), 47-48.
32. Al-Sharji, *Tabaqat al-Khawass*, 53 and 95. For further discussion on the Sayyid history, see Alexander Knysh, "The Sada in History: A Critical Essay on Hadrami Historiography" *JRAS* 9, part 2 (July 1999). See also R. B. Serjeant, *The Sayyids of Hadramawt* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1957).
33. J. Vincent Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 65.
34. Al-Sharji, *Tabaqat al-Khawass*, 250.
35. For further study on these two Sufis, see Muhammad Aziz, "Medieval Sufism in Yemen: The Case of Ahmad b. `Alwan" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2004). Also see the two articles about them by Aziz in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, 3d ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2008), 2:17-19 and 47-49, respectively.
36. `Abd al-Rahman ibn Ja`far ibn `Aqil, *Umar Ba Makhramah al-Saybani: Hayatuhu wa Taswufuhu wa Shi`ruhu* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 2002), 38.
37. Knysh, "The Sada in History," 215. Cf. Serjeant, *The Sayyids of Hadramawt*, 19. Also, see Alexander Knysh's article "Al Alwai, Muhammad b. `Ali," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 3d ed. (Online version: 2007), part 1.