

# tasavvuf

İlmî ve Akademik Araştırma Dergisi



Ankara, 2000

# The Origins of the Term *Sufi*

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## 1. Introduction

As a science, Sufism (*tasawwuf*) is a branch of Islamic study which encompasses the lives and teachings of the Mystics (*Sufis*) of Islam. The English word 'Sufism' is generally used to translate the word *tasawwuf*. In this article, a general overview of the meaning of Sufism shall be presented. The starting point will be the derivation of the word *Sufi*, i.e., Muslim mystic because a distinctive feature of the Arabic language is that the terminology of any Islamic science is closely associated with the etymological roots of the terms used to describe the science in question. Therefore, this chapter will begin with the examination of the etymology and derivation of the word *Sufi*.

As an illustration, if we accept that Sufism is derived from the word *suf* meaning wool, then we will perceive Sufism as a manifestation of an ascetic life style. This is because, wearing woollen garments was perceived by Sufi Classics as a symbol of otherworldliness.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, if we accept that Sufism is derived from the Greek word "*sophos*,"<sup>2</sup> meaning "wise", then, the perspective with which Sufism is viewed, will be radically different. For Sufism will, now, be seen as having a philosophical base, originating from an alien and non-Islamic culture. The implications of this are profound, since Sufism will then be seen not as a product of indigenous Islamic thought but, as a refined development of foreign ideas.

From the previous paragraph it is clear that the study of the etymological origins of Sufism is necessary in order to gain a proper appreciation of its phenomenon. It therefore comes as no surprise that both classical and modern writers frequently introduce the subject of Sufism based on its etymological derivations. In what fol-

1 'A. Badawi, *Tarikh al-Tasawwuf al-Islami min al-Bidaya Hatta al-Qarn al-Thani*, Wakala al-Matbu'at, Kuwait 1975, p. 7.

2 J. Baldick, *Mystical Islam*, I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, London 1992, p. 31.

lows, a brief summary of the main origins of the word Sufism will be presented. Priority will be given to early Sufi authors, centring around the question: "How did the Sufis, themselves, interpret the term Sufism, linguistically and conceptually?"

### 2.1. The Origins of the Term *Sufi*

Many words have been put forward, as the origin of the word *Sufi*. However, the most important seem to be the following:

**2.2:1 *Safa'*:** This literally means "purity" and in the Sufi sense denotes the cleanliness of the hearts and acts of Sufis.<sup>3</sup> A review of the Sufi literature reveals that, this derivation is seen in a favourable light by many Sufi writers. This is because this derivation of the word *Sufi* from *safa'* is in harmony with the goals and aspirations of Sufism *viz.* the purification of the mystic's heart from the spiritual dirt which has accumulated on it. This purification process enables him not only to cleanse the evil thoughts which arise from time to time in his mind, but also to purify the actions committed by his limbs. As a culmination of this process, the obstacles which come between the Sufi and God are removed.

A grammatical analysis of the term *safa'* adds a further interesting dimension to the etymological derivation. Grammatically speaking, the term *Sufi* is the passive form of the verb *safa'* according to the rules of Arabic grammar; hence, *safa'* means 'to purify' and *Sufi* (passive voice) signifies 'a person who has been purified.' This analysis can lead to the conclusion that the Sufi plays a passive role in his quest for self-purification. However, it is important to realise that this in fact is not the true picture of the Sufi's role. A Sufi must exert himself as far as it is in his capacity to do so, but the ultimate purification does not depend on the efforts of the Sufi alone. Rather it is only by the help and intervention of Divine mercy that a Sufi can attain his goal of self-purification. It is in this sense only, that a Sufi can be viewed as a passive participant.

The above derivation of Sufism is given added impetus by the definitions propounded by some of the most eminent and influential personalities of Sufi thought. Like al-Qushayri, al-Hujwiri, the author of the one of the most important Sufi classics, "*Kashf al-Mahjub*", provides a detailed analysis concerning the relation between *safa'* and *Sufism*. al-Hujwiri's starting point is the tradition of the Prophet that: "The purity (*safa'*) of this world has gone, and only its impurity (*kadar*) remained."<sup>4</sup> al-Hujwiri goes on to establish a connection between this tradition and the nature of the Sufi quest: "Therefore, since the people of this

<sup>3</sup> A. Badawi, *Tarikh al-Tasawwuf*, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> al-Hindi, *Kanz al-Ummal fi Sunan al-Aqwal wa al-Afal*, Haydar Abad 1313, 15:551, no:42138; al-Hujwiri *Kashf al-Mahjub*, trans. by R.A. Nicholson, London 1970, p. 30.

persuasion [the Sufis] have purged their morals and conduct, and have sought to free themselves from natural taints, on that account they are called Sufis."<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that in al-Hujwiri's definition of Sufism, there is a great emphasis on the practical side of Sufism, such as, good conduct, cleaning the heart from spiritual taints and so on. This type of definition of Sufism is characteristic of the early Sufis who mainly stressed the practical side of Sufism in contrast to the intellectual or Gnostic side of it. Thus, Sufism is an active process not a passive one.

Another important Sufi, Bishr al-Hafi (d.841) defines a Sufi as one "whose heart is *safi* (sincere or pure) towards God." It can be understood from this definition, that a Sufi is the person whose heart has been cleansed from all worldly desires and taints, which enables him to perceive Divine enlightenment. This definition is also supported by al-Hujwiri who quotes another anonymous definition: "The Sufi is one whose conduct towards God is *safi* (pure, sincere), and towards whom God's blessing is sincere".<sup>6</sup>

It is worthwhile to pause at this juncture to note that there is a common theme around which the definitions of Sufism, based on the derivation from *safa'*, are centred. This common theme is the cleansing of the hearts and practices of the Sufis from the spiritual diseases and obstacles which may arise. As an illustration, Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Kattani<sup>7</sup> (d.934) defines Sufism in the following terms: "Sufism is good moral characteristics. Whoever surpasses you in good moral characteristics surpasses you in purity (*safa'*). According to this definition and others like it, the essence of Sufism is purifying the heart from vices, eliminating the bad moral characteristics and replacing them with good ones. Only then can the Sufi feel the nearness of God. In Abu 'Ali al-Rudhbari's<sup>8</sup> (d. 934) words, "Sufism is the purity (*safa'*) of nearness after the impurity of remoteness." This definition makes clear that until the purification of heart and actions (*a'mal*) occurs the Sufi will be distant from God. Only through purification will he get closer to God.

From the above definitions, it may be understood that these Sufis believe that Sufism is the discipline which enables the disciple to attain spiritual purification through ascetic and other practices, hence enabling the Sufi to obtain salvation. Thus, according to these definitions, Sufism is derived etymologically from *safa'* (purity).

5 al-Hujwiri, *Kashf*, trans. by R.A. Nicholson, p. 31.

6 al-Kalabadhi, *al-Ta'arruf li Madhhab ahli al-Tasawwuf*, trans. by A. J. Arberry, *The Doctrine of the Sufis*, Lahore 1980, p. 5.

7 al-Qushayri, *al-Risalab*, p. 281; trans. by B.R. Von Schlegell *The Principles of Sufism*, Berkeley 1990, p. 304.

8 al-Qushayri, *al-Risalab*, p. 281; *The Principles*, p. 304.

However, most Sufis do not accept this derivation on the basis of grammatical reasons. For example, according to al-Qushayri<sup>9</sup> the word *sufi* cannot be a derivative of *safa'* according to the rules of Arabic grammar. Whether the word *safa'* is the root of Sufism or not, it has, nevertheless, established itself strongly among the basic principles of Sufism: from the perspective of Sufi authors at least.

**2.2:2 *al-Saff al-Awwal*:** This means, literally, the first rank of ritual prayer (*salat*) in the mosque, indicating that the Sufis occupy the first line in all good deeds as well as in the prayer. Explaining this phrase, al-Kalabadhi relates that "they are in the first rank (*saff*) before God, through the elevation of their desires towards Him and the turning of their hearts only unto Him."<sup>10</sup> al-Kalabadhi's definition is very much related to the practical side of Sufism with its stress on devotional worship and attendance to other good acts always in the first ranks.

However, al-Kalabadhi does voice some reservations about this derivation. According to him the rules of Arabic Grammar do not permit such a derivation.<sup>11</sup> In line with this, al-Qushayri, also accepts this derivation as an option, nevertheless, asserting that "Sufi" cannot be the adjective derived from the word "*saff*" for grammatical reasons.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, looking from the perspective of love in Sufi thought, this derivation of the word Sufism does not provide a strong basis for the concept of love to flourish. This is because it seems that the phrase "*saff al-awwal*" denotes the supremacy of action and worship rather than love.

**2.2:3 *Ahl al-Suffa*:** Literally, this word means "the people of the bench": a reference to a group of poor people among the Prophet Muhammad's friends who lived in the mosque and dedicated themselves to the worship and service of God. The Sufis like to identify themselves with the *Ahl al-Suffa*. For example, Shihab al-Din 'Umar al-Suhrawardi<sup>13</sup> (d.1234) elucidates the similarities between the "*people of suffa*" and Sufis in detail. According to him, the people of the *suffa* were leading an ascetic life in the mosque for the sake of eternal bliss. Their example and master was the Prophet. In a similar fashion, Sufis gathered in *tekkes* and *zawiyas*<sup>14</sup> without having any worldly concerns. The collective life of the Sufis under the supervision of a master completely fits with this model of the Prophetic school.

The opinion that the people of *Suffa* were the first prototype of the Sufis is

9 al-Qushayri, *al-Risalab*, p. 279; *The Principles*, p. 302.

10 al-Kalabadhi, *al-Ta'arruf*, p. 28; trans. by *The Doctrines*, p. 5.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

12 al-Qushayri, *The Principles*, p. 302.

13 al-Suhrawardi, *'Awarif al-Ma'arif*, Beirut 1966, p. 61.

14 Buildings which are established for the convention of the Sufis, See, A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 231.

especially accepted by the Sufis who struggled to establish a direct relationship between Sufism and the Prophet and his companions, thus proving that Sufism came exclusively from pure Islamic sources. Since the topic of this research is not the foreign influence on Sufism, this matter will not be discussed in great length.<sup>15</sup>

There is no doubt that the existence of the people of *Suffa* gave enough justification for the Sufi movement and their systemisation, at least according to the Sufis' own statements. Although Suhrawardi finds parallels between Sufis and the people of *Suffa*, he is cautious about this derivation for etymological reasons, as well. The majority of Sufi authors seem to be very observant of grammatical rules in their search for the derivation of the word Sufi. Hence, many derivations are rejected on this basis. This obsession with grammar does not always lead scholars to the correct solution, since social phenomena do not necessarily follow the rules constructed by grammarians.

**2.2:4 *Suf*:** This word literally means wool: "*Suf*" is accepted generally as the root of Sufism, hence it is the most important option among other derivations. al-Sarraj (d.988), the earliest writer on Sufism, gives a very reasonable explanation about the derivation of Sufism under the title of "*The chapter clarifying the name al-Sufiyyah, why they were called by this name and why they were identified by wearing this garment*". According to him, they are not named after any of their interior qualities but by their exterior appearance, which is mostly wearing of wool as a symbol of asceticism and piety. al-Sarraj justifies such naming by giving an example of describing people by their garments from the Qur'an. In the Qur'an, the disciples of Jesus are called after their garments. They are called "*Hawari*"<sup>16</sup> meaning "people who wear white clothes". Although they had other more important distinctive attributes regarding their religious knowledge and conduct, yet they were named after their garments. Similarly, Sufis are named after their woollen garment which was the practice of the prophets and the righteous believers.<sup>17</sup>

al-Sarraj also mentions other reasons; according to him, on their spiritual journey to God, the Sufis always pass through different stations (*maqamat*) and states (*ahwal*). Because the Sufi experience is personal, no two Sufis can share the same station. Their spiritual stations and states differ from each other at all times. Secondly, the Sufis are always in progress, they never stop for long in any station, hence it is impossible to name them after a certain station such as being repentant, ascetic and so on. Thirdly, because the Sufis possess, according to al-Sarraj,

15 See A. 'Affifi, *al-Tasawwuf al-Thaura al-Rub'iyya*, p. 65-68.

16 Qur'an, 3:52.

17 al-Sarraj, *al-Luma'*, p. 20-21; al-Kalabadhi, Abu Bakr, *al-Ta'arruf*, p. 34.

all the praised qualities, they cannot be named after one specific characteristic. For these reasons it is impossible to name them after their interior qualities.<sup>18</sup> As a result of this, the most simple and effective way is to name them after some external quality which is shared by all Sufis. This quality is nothing but wearing wool.

In addition to al-Sarraj, 'Umar al-Suhrawardi supports this opinion. Initially, he brings historical evidence from the life of the Prophet and his companions, that wearing wool symbolises asceticism. He relates that the Prophet used to ride a donkey (because of his humility) and wear woollen garments. He also relates a Prophetic saying which confirms that a group of seventy prophets used the woollen garment before the Prophet Muhammad, as a sign of modesty.<sup>19</sup>

al-Suhrawardi considers wearing wool as a sign of renunciation of the world, in opposition to the lusts and comforts of the lower soul. Therefore he writes "both from the point of meaning and etymology, 'suf' (wool) is the most appropriate root for the word Sufism."<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, he highlights another aspect of this nomenclature, saying that if Sufis had named themselves after their spiritual features such as repentance or patience, this would be boasting and making a claim which is against the Sufi modesty in particular. Since they called themselves after their exterior appearance, there is no boasting and making a false claim. This is nearer to humility which is an important element in Sufi philosophy.<sup>21</sup>

al-Kalabadhi discusses all these etymologies from the perspective of grammar and meaning. He arrives at the conclusion that if the derivation from "suf" is accepted then there is no problem from the grammatical point of view, while at the same time the word has all the necessary meanings which are implied by the other etymologies such as withdrawal from the world, inclining the soul away from it, denying the carnal soul of its pleasures, purifying conduct, cleansing the conscience etc.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, al-Qushayri rejects the idea that the word Sufism came from *suf* on the grounds that "...the Sufis are not distinguished by wearing wool..." He concludes that; "This group (the Sufis) are so well known that it is not necessary to find an analogy or derivation for their designation."<sup>23</sup> According to him, the word Sufi is a proper name which has not been derived from any root. Hence, nothing can be deduced from the etymological analysis of the word Sufism concerning its origins.

18 al-Kalabadhi, Abu Bakr, *al-Ta'arruf*, p. 34.

19 See Bukhari, *al-Sahib, Libas*, n. 107; *Ansar*, n. 237; al-Suhrawardi, *'Awarif*, p. 59.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 60-61.

22 al-Kalabadhi, *The Doctrines*, p. 10.

23 al-Qushayri, *al-Risalah*, p. 289; *The Principles*, p. 302.

A few comments are necessary regarding al-Qushayri's conclusions. First, there are opinions against his conclusion that Sufis are not distinguished by wearing wool. For example, al-Junayd (d.911), one of the most influential personalities in the history of Sufism claims that the wearing of woollen garments is an essential part of Sufism.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, a perusal of much Sufi classical literature reveals that *suf* was an essential part of Sufi custom and was generally worn by the Sufis. These opposing opinions show that there was no consensus among Sufi sources concerning an etymological derivation based on wool.

This dispute on the etymology and origin of 'Sufism' seems to have continued until the present day. Not only Muslim scholars and Sufi authors, but also Western scholars have been drawn into the argument about the etymological derivation. In 1818, Joseph von Hammer came up with the idea that Sufism derived from the Greek word "*sophos*",<sup>25</sup> hence he implied that Sufism is a product of philosophical contemplation. This idea has been championed for a long time. However, this idea of one orientalist was rejected strongly by another orientalist i.e. Noldeke. He proves etymologically that this derivation is impossible. Additionally, he cites a number of passages showing that, in the first two centuries of Islam, woollen garments were worn especially by ascetics. The phrase *labisa al-suf*, 'he clad himself in wool' signifying 'he renounced the world and become an ascetic' occur frequently in early literature; at a later period, when asceticism had evolved into mysticism, *labisa al-suf* generally means 'he became a Sufi'. "In Persian", he writes, "the ascetic is often called *pashmina-push*, i.e. 'wearing woollen garment.' These arguments by Nöldeke left no doubt in the minds of Western scholars that Sufism basically started as an ascetic movement, originating from Islamic sources.<sup>26</sup>

Nowadays, the majority of modern western scholars such as Arberry,<sup>27</sup> E.G. Browne,<sup>28</sup> A. Schimmel,<sup>29</sup> M. Smith<sup>30</sup> and so on, seem to accept this derivation. Therefore, the dispute over the derivation and origins of Sufism seems to have reached a conclusion.

On the other hand, as discussed above, classical Sufi authors have no consensus on the derivation of Sufism. Some of them are in favour of "*safa*" and others of "*suf*" and others still prefer to accept Sufism as a proper name itself wit-

24 al- Hujwiri, *Kashf*, p. 39-40; al-Kalabadhi, A., *al-Ta'arruf*, p. 31.

25 'A. Badawi, *Tarikh al-Tasawwuf*, p. 10; Joseph von Hammer, *Geschichte der Schönen Rede-künste Persiens*, Vienna 1818, p. 346.

26 A. R. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, G. Bell and Sons LTD., London 1979, p. 3-4.

27 Arberry, *An account of the Mystics of Islam*, London 1990, p. 35.

28 E.G. Browne, *Religious Systems of the World*, London 1908, p. 314.

29 A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, p. 35.

30 M. Smith, *Readings from the Mystics of Islam*, London 1972, p. 2.

hout any derivation. After considered reflection, it appears that the derivation of the word Sufism from "*suf*" is the most plausible one. This is for the following reason: firstly, this possibility alone has no etymological problem in derivation. All other possible derivations have a problem from an etymological point of view in some way or another. Secondly, as cited above, the customs of that time support this theory; and finally as being a symbol of a certain life-style *suf* does not exclude the meanings which are implied by the other derivational possibilities whereas these other options, once one of them is accepted, exclude the rest.

As a result, it may be concluded that the origins of the word Sufism point to the practices of an ascetic nature such as poverty, fasting, promptly following the commandments of the Divine law. Therefore we can safely claim that Sufism has started as an ascetic movement.