



Received: 2023/02/1  
Accepted: 2023/02/22  
Published: 2023/07/01

<sup>1</sup> Professor of Sociology,  
Department of Social Work and  
Criminology, Faculty of Health  
and Occupational Studies,  
University of Gävle, Gävle,  
Sweden.

E-mail:  
Fereshteh.Ahmadi@hig.se

How to cite this article:  
Ahmadi, Fereshteh. (2023).  
Integration of Sufi Ideas into the  
Ways of Thinking of Iranians,  
*The International Journal of  
Humanities* (2023) Vol. 30 (3):  
(12-31).

<https://ejih.modares.ac.ir/article-27-67225-en.html>

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Integration of Sufi Ideas into the Ways of Thinking of Iranians

Fereshteh Ahmadi<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In this article, I will discuss the integration of the Sufi ideas into the Iranian ways of thinking. I will put forward some factors, which explain the reason why Sufi ideas could impact the Iranian ways of thinking and become an integrated part of it. This issue is important since one of the reasons for several social problems from which the Iranian society suffers can be found in the Iranian group-oriented ways of thinking and the lack of an individual-oriented perspective concerning every citizen's not only rights but duties as well. The mystical dimension of Iranian ways of thinking is regarded as one of the factors, which counteracted the growth of concern for the individual self in the ways of thinking of Iranians.

**Keywords:** Sufism; Mental Attitude; Islamic Mysticism; Tasawwuf; Persian Mysticism.

پژوهشگاه علوم انسانی و مطالعات فرهنگی  
پرتال جامع علوم انسانی

## Introduction

Sufism has had such a crucial impact on Islamic thought as Nasr states:

No study in depth of Islamic society is possible without taking into consideration the action of these "societies within society" [different orders of the Sufis]. (Nasr, 1972:19)

And, as Lewisohn points out:

Sufism is, in fact, the central facet of traditional Islam and as Victor Danner observes... constitutes its very essence. (Lewisohn, 1992:12)

Danner also draws attention to the fact that Sufism was "an all-pervasive reality that touched everyone, even scoffer and critic of the path"; and the Sufis and their deeds "were well-known and loved by the people and even by some of the doctors of the Law" (Danner, 1988: 95). Furthermore, as Binyon, Nasr and other scholars show, the influence of Sufism has been tremendous in the field of arts and sciences in Islamic societies, especially in Iran (Binyon, 1935).

When explaining the important role played by Sufism in structuring the ways of thinking of Iranians, I have to show that the domain of

influence of Sufism has not been limited to the cultural structure of some Sufi orders, but it is extended to society as a whole. In this respect, the task of explaining the widespread and hearty acceptance of Sufism by a large proportion of the people in Iran - and not just some sheikhs - becomes inevitable. In the following, I try to discuss some important factors which explain the integration of Sufi ideas into the ways of thinking of Iranians.

Proceeding from the study of Persian Sufism, Lewisohn comes to the conclusion that the paramount psychological cause behind the blooming of Sufism during the medieval period - the period between 13th and 15th centuries when the later form of Sufism flourished - might be the existence of an innate predisposition to mysticism in the Persian psyche (Lewisohn, 1992:12) - as Zarrinkub (1978) describes it - or "le geni iranien ... la vocation imprescriptible de l'ame iranienne" as Corbin (1991:x) calls it.

According to Lewisohn this thesis is not merely a few orientalist's subjective and personal sentiment, but represents the opinion

of a wide spectrum of Islamicists, literary historians, religionists and historians. (Lewisohn, 1992:12).

Whether this claim is true or not is not the issue. What is important here is the extent to which Sufism is considered an inseparable aspect of the ways of thinking of Iranians. A study of Sufism's legacy of Iranian culture (Arberry, 1963) and the extremely strong impact of Sufism on Iranian literature, leaves no grounds for hesitation about the fact that Sufism is not an insignificant and temporary element in the Iranian belief system, but rather an integrated part of this people's culture, which has survived through the centuries. Few will dispute the fact that the development of Sufism owes much to Iranian mystics.

It is exactly because of the existence of such an intimate relation between Sufism and Iranian thought that I can affirm the deep impact of the Sufi conception of man on the ways of thinking of Iranians. In this respect, I am addressing the character of Sufism not merely as a religious tendency but as a cultural phenomenon which has played a crucial role in the construction and development of the

concept of man as the Iranian people understand it. It is therefore that we first must, as indicated above, inquire into those factors which caused the widespread and hearty acceptance of Sufism by the people in Iran. This has resulted, then, in the survival and even blossoming of Sufism, especially the medieval Sufism with its "pantheistic" feature, in Irano-Islamic culture. In studying this, we will consider only those factors that have helped Sufism become accepted by and remain popular among the Iranian people.

#### ***Iranian Familiarity with Mystical Ideas before the Introduction of Islam***

One of the most important reasons for the integration of Sufi ideas into the ways of thinking of Iranians is this people's familiarity with some aspects of mysticism due to their ancient philosophies and religions.

The similarities between "*Rg-Veda*"<sup>1</sup> and "*Avesta*"<sup>2</sup>, and in general between Indian and Iranian mythology (Moulton, 1913), both based on common gods, indicate that although Iranian thought did not exhaust its potentials by reaching the same level of abstraction and imaginative conception of the world that characterizes Indian mysticism, it possessed the potential for integrating the mystical view. This potential provided the spiritual background for modifying the ancient Iranian view of the dualism<sup>3</sup> between the good spirit of light - *Ormizd* - and the demon - *Ahriman* - by considering both *Ormizd* and *Ahriman* as emanating from an original principle of infinite time (*Zurvan*).

Actually, the mystical element in both Indian and ancient Iranian thought is so strong that Sufism, as Schimmel stresses, is considered by some researchers, e.g., E. H. Palmer, as the development of the primeval

religion of the "Aryan race" (Schimmel, 1975: 9). In this respect, although Nicholson rejects the theory which regards Sufism as the product of Indian or Persian thought or, more precisely, as a reaction of the Aryan mind against a conquering Semitic religion, he admits that statements of this kind are partially true (Nicholson, 1989). The similarity between some aspects of ancient Iranian philosophy and some of Sufism's is undeniable. This similarity was crucial not only for the spread of Sufism among the Iranian people but also for its development from an ascetic to a contemplative tendency. Having this in mind, Annemarie Schimmel holds the view that:

Sufism has often been considered a typically Iranian development inside Islam. There is no doubt that certain important Iranian elements have survived through the ages beneath its surface as both Henri Corbin and

<sup>1</sup> *Rg-veda* is regarded the oldest samhita or collection of hymns, sacrificial formulas, etc. it is one of the most important documents concerning Indian mythology.

<sup>2</sup> Here we are talking about the original text of *Avesta*, especially the oldest part of it, *Garthas*, which is considered one of the best sources for the study of the Iranian mythology.

<sup>3</sup> Here it should be mentioned that the ancient Iranian view of dualism can hardly be considered as ontological as it is the case in Greek philosophy. It indicates rather ideas about existence as a combination of two principles, namely good and evil or light and darkness.

Seyyed H. Nasr have recently emphasized. ((Schimmel, 1975:10)

What is of primary importance from the point of view of this study is that, even before Islam, some of the ideas characteristic of Sufism were already familiar to Iranians Zarrinkub (1978:116). There are similarities between Sufism and the archaic culture of ancient Mazdean Iran. One of these concerns the intimate relation of man with God. When examining the relationship between God and man in ancient Iranian religions, especially in the teachings of Zoroaster, it ought to be born in mind that this relationship is not regarded as that of a lord to his servant, but as that between two friends. As Ashtiani (1988: 129) maintains, Lommel, in his book "*Die Religion Zoroasters*", regarded the dialogue between God and man in the message of Zoroaster precisely as a dialogue between two close friends. Schaefer shares this view. He says, as Ashtiani has cited him, that the view of the relationship between God and man in the message of Zoroaster is very close to the view, which is prevalent in mysticism. Zoroaster, according to Schaefer, talks with God in such

a way that no distance between God and man can be perceived (Ashtiani, 1988:129).

Corbin accords with Schaefer's view that the Iranian conception of the relations of man with God differs from the Occidental. He proceeds from the story of *Prometheus* and tries to show why any suspicion about a competing relationship between man and God in the Iranian thought is out of question. As indicated above, the myth of Prometheus which characterizes the stealing of fire as a symbol of man's audacity in front of gods reveals apparently the rivalry between man and gods in Greek mythology. The fundamental conceptions of Iranian cosmology, either those of ancient Zoroastrian Iran or those of Shiite Iran are, as Corbin maintains, quite the opposite of the myth of Prometheus.

For the believer who experiences the Iranian concept of Light at the heart of his being, the myth of Prometheus cannot but seem a violent perversion of the reality of things, for Fire and Light are the sacred gift given to men by the Powers of Light. (Corbin, 1986: 50-51).

It would be a perversion since for the Zoroastrian believer, who "is a knight fighting alongside the lord of Light" (Corbin, 1986:50-51)., to betray his lord or to desert the struggle is out of question. Actually an Iranian believer considers himself as a comrade-in-arms with God defending the Fire and Light (Ibid, 1986:50-51). This relationship, indeed, makes the perversion of the idea of the Heavenly Gift into that of Promethean theft impossible; -such a perversion may turn man from a friend of God into His enemy. Yet, this has never been possible within the framework of Iranian thought with its characteristic strong tradition of friendly relations between man and God<sup>4</sup>. What we observe here is nothing but a very intimate and friendly relationship between man and God in Iranian thought, which, as Corbin says, is a carry-over from Zoroastrian Persia into Shiite Persia (Corbin, 1986: 50-51).

---

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the preceding discussion, in agreement with Corbin we regard the commitment of such a perversion as the first episode of the "philosophical disfiguration of man" in the West, (See Corbin, 1986, p.51), but we can equally well understand why there are hardly any traces of such a "disfiguration" regarding the concept of man in Persian Sufism. It is noteworthy that the "philosophical disfiguration of man" means indeed the "descendent" of man from a sacred being to an

At any rate, it is undeniable that some features of the message of Zoroaster are very close to mystical ideas, among others those of Sufism.<sup>5</sup> It is probably because of such similarities that, as indicated above, Zoroaster became one of the three main personages whose ideas introduced Theosophical Sufism based on the Sohrevardian philosophy, a school that has "the interpretation of the platonic archetypes in terms of Zoroastrian angelology" (Corbin, 1993: 20) as one of its characteristics.

Another ancient Iranian religion in which we find an important place being given to mystical elements is the Manichaean religion. Mani (215 A.D.), who is the prophet of this religion, attempted to combine the teaching of Zoroaster and Jesus in order to create a new religion with a universal character. Doing this, he focused his endeavor on the agnostic

individual-in-the world, i.e., the growth of concern for the individual self in the Western ways of thinking.

<sup>5</sup> About the mystical elements in the doctrine of Zoroaster, Gherardo Gnoli says that Zoroaster proclaimed a doctrine which was noticeably mystico-philosophical. According to him, the reason is that this doctrine had its roots in a psychic and mental experience which notwithstanding its striking originality, was related to the Indo-Iranian conceptions of inner vision. (Gnoli, 1980, p.228)

interpretation of the Gospel of St. John. Since the Manichaean religion was not so widespread among Iranians as Zoroastrianism we are not going to deal with its philosophy here. Still, it is noteworthy that the teachings of Mani, which are strongly influenced by the agnostic ideas and viewed as a combination of Neoplatonism and Stoicism with some aspects of Chinese thought, are considered as one of those ancient Iranian doctrines that have affected some trends of Sufism in Iran<sup>6</sup>. According to the Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions, there is "evidence of some degree of syncretism between Buddhism and Manichaeism, an Iranian dualistic religion that was founded in the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE" (Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions, "Buddhism").

However, as I hope to have made clear, there exists a deep mystical view in ancient Iranian religions, something that has

immensely contributed to the acceptance of Sufi ideas by Iranians.<sup>7</sup>

Another fact which shows the familiarity of Iranians with mystical views before the domination of Islam is the prevalence of Buddhism for more than thousand years in the Northeast of Iran (in Balkh and Bokhara), which is considered the most important center for Iranian Sufis. A considerable amount of the population of this area had converted to Buddhism before Islam became the official religion in Iran. It is therefore not so strange that Islamic mysticism found the best soil for its growth in this part of Iran. Indeed, Buddhism might be considered as one of the sources for the development of Sufism and as a factor behind the integration of mystical ideas into the Iranian thought.

It should be mentioned that some of the methods of Sufism concerning the spiritual way (*Tariqah*) owe, perhaps, their origin to Buddhism. Besides, some essential ideas of

<sup>6</sup> So, for example has Manichaeism influenced the Ismaili Gnostics. As Corbin maintains: "Nous avons révélé ailleurs les traces indéniables et profondes de la gnose manichéenne sur la gnose ismaélienne; seulement, le nom de Mani n'y est pas prononcé." (Corbin, 1991, p.58).

<sup>7</sup> In this respect Corbin says: "En effet, ..., si théosophie des Orientaux revient à dire théosophie orientale, c'est parce que la sagesse des anciens Perses était précisément la haute théosophie mystique..." (see Corbin, 1993, p.49)



Sufism, such as the conception of the passing-away (*fana*) are very similar to that of Buddhism. At any rate, Iranians' acquaintance with Buddhism helped them to find the ideas of Sufism familiar and made it easy for them to adapt these ideas to their ways of life.

### ***The Mystical Ideas and the Domination of Shi'ism in Iran***

Another factor that explains why Sufism became widespread in Iran, especially from the thirteenth A. D. onwards, is the expansion and domination of Shi'ism in the country. The relation of Sufism with Shi'ism is one of the most discussed issues in the history of Islamic philosophy.<sup>8</sup> In his books, Corbin tries to show the spiritual aspect of Shi'ism and its close relationship with Sufism and the Philosophy of Light (Corbin, 1971; Corbin, 1976). There is, however, no doubt that some ideas and theories of Shi'ism are not so different from those of Sufism. Although, as Schimmel maintains, the congruency between the theories of Shi'ism and Sufism has not yet been completely clarified, some doctrines such as

the theories of the primordial light of Mohammad, saintship in Sufism, and the ideas of "the imamate and gradual initiation of adepts into deeper realms of faith, into new levels of spiritual interpretation" in Shi'ism are very similar in their hierarchical structure (Schimmel, 1975: 82-83). Regarding these similarities, Corbin states that:

there is yet another form of metaphysics in Islam, without which it may be impossible to explain the beginnings and the development of Sufism. This other form is essentially the Shiite gnosis which goes back to the Imams themselves (Corbin, 1993:103).

When discussing the question of the relation of Sufism with Shi'ism, we must be aware of the fact mentioned by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in his book "Sufi Essays" that we are not dealing with the same dimension of Islam (Nasr, 1992). According to Nasr, we can say, in connection with the two dimensions of Islam, i.e., the exoteric (*zahir*) and the esoteric (*batin*), that if the latter crystallized into the form of

<sup>8</sup> Although many scholars, such as Nasr and Corbin, regard the integration of Sufism with Shi'ism as positive for the development of the philosophical thought in

Iran, there are others, such as S. J. Tabataba'i, who consider it harmful (See Tabataba'i, 1994, pp.257-290).



Sufism in the Sunni world, then in the Shi'i world Sufism poured into its whole structure (the esoteric as well as the exoteric dimensions) especially during its early period. Therefore, mystical ideas have been prevented from being integrated into the whole structure of the Sunni thought while this was not the case with Shi'ism.

Here one may argue that, over the centuries, a great number of Sufis have lived in the Sunni world. Yet, when we address ourselves to the non-integration of Sufism into Sunni thought, in no way do we maintain that Sufism as a sect or organization did not exist in the religious climate of Sunni countries. What we have in mind is the integration of Sufi ideas into the whole religio-intellectual discourse as is the case of Shiite Islam. Indeed, as Corbin mentions:

the "phenomenon of Sufism" in some measure differs according to whether it is lived in Shiite Iran or whether it is lived in Sunni Islam, the Islam with which orientalist until now have been most familiar (Corbin, 1993:188).

The domination of the doctrine of *Walayah* (the esoteric aspect of prophecy) in Persian

Sufism, together with the synthesis of ancient Iranian thought (especially the Iranian conception of cosmology) with Sufi ideas are maybe the most important characteristics which separate Persian Sufism from "Sunni" Sufism.

In the Sunni world where the exoteric dimension of Islam is more important than the esoteric, there has been a strong tendency towards the institutionalization of the mystical paths leading to God. Consequently, Sufism has come to establish organizations, which in many cases, have altered it from a spiritual phenomenon to the formal ideology of a sect. Yet, although there have always existed such organizations in Iran, there are many Sufi congregations which have neither external organizations nor denominations. These congregations, whose existence is purely spiritual, are led by a spiritual guide (whose name is mostly kept secret) who helps Sufis in their journey towards God. In such groups, hardly any concrete or rigid rules prevail. It is, mainly, personal initiation which is dominant. What is important here is that not being obliged to follow difficult and

incomprehensible rules of discipline has made it easy for common people to be able to enter into such "organizations". All this has prevented Sufism from becoming an unattainable "phenomenon" and have helped its popularity among people in Iran.

It must be mentioned that when talking about the inner relation between Shi'ism and Sufism we do not take them in their historical manifestation in later periods. Such a relation becomes more evident only if, as Nasr (1972:106) points out, "we mean by Shi'ism Islamic esotericism as such". Regarding the historical relationship between Sufism and Shi'ism, one can recognize two stages: the parallel establishment of Sufism with Shi'ism on the one hand; and the period during which Sufism influenced later Shi'ism on the other. A discussion of these stages will take us too far afield; therefore, let us only mention that if the connection between Shi'ism and early Sufism from the sixth to the ninth centuries was most intimate, after the eighth Imam, Ali al-Riza

(d.818), the Shiite Imams did not openly identify themselves with Sufis and there appeared a separation between Shi'ism and Sufism. While Shi'is began to actively participate in the political life, many Sufis took refuge from the world, dissociating themselves particularly from politics (Nasr, 1972:106).

In Iran, however, the relations between Sufism and Shi'ism became more obvious when a regular Sufi order in the north-west of the country developed into a group for indoctrinating Shi'i thought. That Shi'ism became the official religion in Iran in the sixteenth century, after the victory of Shah Ismail the Safavid<sup>9</sup>, was mostly because of the endeavors of this group. Due to the victory of Shi'ism, Iranian mystics, after having endured numerous problems over the centuries, finally succeeded in spreading their ideas widely in Iran. This is true at least during certain periods of Safavid rule, for instance under the reign of Safi and Abbas II. Even when Sufism encountered a great deal of difficulty under the

---

<sup>9</sup> Shah Ismail and the other Safavid rulers are often called by Arabs and early Europeans "Sufi" or "Grand Sophi". (Schimmel, 1975, p.83)

reign of latter Safavids, it continued to spread among Iranians by changing its name to *irfan*. The reaction against the Sufi orders, as Nasr (1972:118) explains, is partly

due to royal patronage of Sufism, many extraneous elements had joined it for worldly ends and also because some of the orders became lax in their practice of the *shari'ah*. [Accordingly], to this day one can openly study, teach and discuss *irfan* but never tasawwuf, which is too often associated with the indisiplined and lax dervishes oblivious to the injunctions of the *shari'ah*...

In addition, one important reason for the suppression of Sufism in the later Safavid policy was the fact that the consolidation of Twelver Shi'ism in Iran, as the main endeavor of Safavid kings, required the elimination of some features of Sufism. Safavid rulers regarded some Sufi orders as enemies and tried to eliminate them both physically and intellectually. The integration of Sufi ideas into Shi'i thought was partly an endeavor to neutralize some radical ideas of Sufis. The elimination of some Sufi orders did not mean, thus, the elimination of Sufi ideas in Iranian

intellectual thought. Because of the persecution of Sufis, Lewisohn (1992, pp.18-19) actually calls some periods under Safavids in the fifth century "the darkest chapter in the entire history of Islamic Sufism" and he stresses:

Of course, Sufism did not «vanish» under the Safavids... One notable form in which Sufi teachings did continue to flourish in the Safavid Period was in the remarkable elaboration of the philosophical irfani tradition, which brought together Kalam, Peripatetic and illuminationist philosophy of Ibn Arabi. The outstanding figure in this endeavor was Mulla Sadra, who, following on the writings of the Pre-Safavid Haydar Amuli, effectively integrated Ibn Arabi into the new Shi'ite-Persian religious world.

The integration of the thoughts of Ibn Arabi into the new Shi'ite-Persian religious world does not mean that there afterwards was no conflict between Sufis and some exoteric scholars. Indeed, the struggle between the Sufis and the dogmatic jurists of the letter of the Law (the Mullas) has been one of the most

important conflicts in the history of Islamic thought. A thorough analysis of this issue would require a monograph in itself and is thus far outside the scope of this study. What is essential for our study is that the synthesis of some Sufi ideas, especially that of Ibn Arabi, with Shi'i thought, to a high degree helped Persian Sufism to be accepted as an integrated part of Shi'ism in Iran. In this connection, the role of Abu Hamid Muhammad Ghazzali (d.111), who linked the teachings of the *ulama* scholars to *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) with a respect for the independent wisdom of the Sufi mystics, should not be neglected. As Hodgson (1977:203) maintains, Abu Hamid Gazzali's teachings helped to make Sufism acceptable to the *ulama* themselves. By the twelfth century it was a recognized part of religious life and even of religious *ilm* knowledge.

The deep influence of and the great respect which Shi'ite thinkers have for both Mulla Sadra and Ibn Arabi despite their radical criticism of dogmatic clericalism show the extent to which the Sufi ideas were accepted by Iranian-Islamic scholars. The essential point for us here is the fact that the integration of

some Sufi ideas into the new Shi'ism in Iran not only made possible the continuity of the flourishing of Sufi teachings in Safavid periods and afterwards, but also helped to increase the popularity of mystical ideas among Iranian people. Indeed, as Marshall Hodgson shows in his book "The Venture of Islam", Sufism rises to a position of dominance in medieval Persian religious culture. This in turn contributed to the survival of Sufi ideas in the ways of thinking of Iranians, especially in the form of poetry which, because of its extremely symbolic form, could ably hide the real meaning of the mystical ideas. It is true that mystical ideas are usually expressed in symbolic forms. However, the use by Sufis of symbolic language for expressing their ideas can be explained by reference to the fact that the real meaning of Sufi ideas could sharpen the antagonism between the clerical perspective and the Sufi outlook. This symbolic clothing of ideas may explain why the poems of some famous poets, such as Bayezid Bastami (d. 874), Khayyam (d. 1123), Rumi (d. 1273) and Hafiz (d. 1389), which call into question the orthodox conception of God and were in direct opposition to the exoteric scholar conception

of divine law, could not only be accepted by Iranians, even by many ulamas, but became widespread among the people.

In sum, although certain radical ideas of some Sufis were not in line with that of Shi'ism, and although many orders were eliminated or degenerated under the Safavid period, it can hardly be denied that there existed an inner relationship between certain Sufi doctrines and Shi'ism. This relationship played a crucial role in the integration of Sufi ideas into the ways of thinking of Iranian. The domination of Shi'ism in Iran and the integration of certain mystical ideas into Shi'i thought thus helped Sufism to become widespread in Iran, especially from the thirteenth century onwards.

### ***The Political and Social Situation and the Acceptance of Sufism***

One vital factor accounting for the popularity of Sufism among Iranians is its function as a consolation for the Iranian people, who were living under the horror of the Mongol conquerors. The consequences of Chingiz Khan's invasion of northern Iran - which has always been the "capital" of Sufism - in the thirteenth century were a continual state of

violence, including the extermination of a large number of Iranians, devastation of property, insecurity and banditry, persisting for a whole century. In such a situation, Sufism not only survived, but also blossomed. Indeed, Sufism, as Raja'i (cited by Lewisohn, 1992: 32) remarks, became

the sole force capable of saving the soul of the Iranian populace, casting a ray of hope and courage into the traumatized hearts of the inhabitants of medieval Persia. For the Sufi masters promised the populace - in the safety of Sufism - liberation from the aggravation of their corrupt contemporaries, offering as companions individuals or refined and sensitive feelings, instead of blackguards and tyrants...[It is therefore that]...the poetry of this period and the following century (eighth Islamic/fourteenth Christian century)...is little more than an attempt to offer condolences to the reader.

This consolatory function of Sufi ideas has been the subject of many discussions about Sufism especially among Iranian intellectuals. There are some, who without denying the

contributions made by Sufism to Iranian culture, regard the political and social impact of Sufism on the history of Iran as a negative factor. According to this view, Sufism functioned as a means to escape the world in the sense of avoiding every contact with the social milieu. In this way, it hindered people from an active struggle for a better future - religion as "opium for the people". Others stress, on the contrary, the positive political impact of Sufism on the struggle of Iranians to regain independence after the invasions of Arabs and Mongols. Whether Sufism has exerted a negative or positive influence upon Iranian social life does not, however, change the fact that it has played a central role in reducing the psychological impact of the terror. This contributed to the fact that Sufism became not only widespread among Iranians but also "the dominant cultural and intellectual current during the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries" (Lewisohn, 1992, p.32).

That the Sufis' special conception of Divine Justice differed from that of other religious currents in Iran is another paramount factor accounting for the popularity of Sufism among

Iranians, who were suffering under the prevailing injustice which became even more intensified after the invasion first by the Arabs (seventh century) and then by the Mongols (thirteenth century). Sufis developed their own notion of justice, achieved by a completely different method than that of theologians. By rejecting both the substance and the form of theological justice, Sufis tried to realize Divine Justice through direct contact with God, i.e., through meditation and spiritual exercises. By describing God's attributes in highly abstract and poetic symbols such as Light, Beauty, and Love, instead of using theological concepts such as Will or Wisdom, Sufis contributed to the development of the notion of Justice as an emanation from or a manifestation of Truth (*Haqq*). In the concept of "*Haqq*", all the highest values are embodied (Khadduri, 1984:71). This concept of Justice, in which love is the only basis for moral perfection, is very far from *Shari'a* (Islamic code of Law) and its complicated religious precepts for achieving Justice. The Sufi movement, Khadduri (1984:71) holds,

having certain objectives in common with utopian movements, may be

regarded, at least in part, as a protest by men of piety and uprightness against the prevailing evil and injustice, and an attempt to set an example for other believers of how to overcome evil and injustice. It may also be regarded as a reaction to theological and other forms of intellectual discourse, which failed to resolve fundamental questions about the destiny of man and the realization of the *jus divinum* on the Earth.

With its special interpretation of the notion of Divine Justice and with a language better understood by ordinary people than theologians (especially when it concerns the question of Justice) Sufism could easily be accepted among common people who were living under extreme political and psychological pressure and were tired of the scholastic discussions carried out by theologians.

### ***The Development of the Persian Language and the Popularity of Sufism***

If the above mentioned factors helped Sufism to be accepted among people, there is still one essential reason that made Sufism not only a cherished religious current, but also an

important cultural orientation in Iran. This is the role of Sufism in the renewal and development of the Persian language.

Poetry has for more than one thousand years been the most important, most developed and popular form of art in Iran. According to Islamic law, non-religious music, dance, etc., were all forbidden and therefore Islamic poetry became almost the only artistic form of expression for Iranians. Bearing in mind the fact that the language of poetry has always been one of the best forms of expression of mystical ideas, it is not difficult to understand that the Iranian strong tradition of poetry has contributed to the development of the mystical ideas of Sufism. Nobody familiar with Islamic mystical texts needs to be informed about the importance of Iranian mystical poetry for studying Sufism. Emphasizing this point, Schimmel (1975: 8) holds that it was mainly through the translation of Persian classical poetry that most of the information about Oriental spirituality could be obtained. In this respect, Nicholson (2007:106) states that:



In mystical poetry the Arabs yield the palm to the Persians. Anyone who would read the secret of Sufism, no longer encumbered with theological articles nor obscured by metaphysical subtleties - let him turn to Attar, Jalaluddin Rumi, and Jami, whose works are partially accessible in English and other European language.

And according to Francesco Gabrieli (1995:100), an Italian Islamicist:

The Persian genius alone gave to Muslim mysticism the glory of a luxuriant poetic bloom in which the innate aptitude of the Iranians for narration and the sentence combined with the energy of a highly stimulated emotionality and with the audacity of the most unbridled esoteric speculations...All the great minds of the West, from Goethe to Hegel, who sought to approach this aspect of Muslim spirituality, actually took as their guides not the Arabic ascetics or doctors but the great Persian poets we have just named.

The legacy of Persian culture to Sufism is so evident that few will dispute it. However, the primary issue for our study is not the

development of Sufism by its use of the Persian language, but the consequences of this act for the extension of Sufism from the theological field to the everyday life of common people and for making the ideas of Sufism the very essential dimension of Iranian thought and culture. Iranian people, who had always adored and loved poetry, became fascinated by the beautiful language of the Sufis. As a result, despite their complex ideas the mystical poems of Persian Sufis became very favored and common among people within a short time. The poems of Hafiz and Jalaluddin Rumi, well-known in the Western world for their mystical ideas, are so prevalent among Iranians that it is no exaggeration to claim that there are only a few Iranians who have not read or listened to a recital of at least one of these poems. One of the many reasons why mystical poetry survived among Iranians during so many centuries is the fact that Iranian children used to memorize these poems (Nasr, 1992:5). Even today, students read and memorize the poetry of Hafiz, Rumi and others. It is therefore not surprising that "to this day there is hardly anyone in Persia, even among the so-called illiterate people, who does not remember a

number of verses of this poetry" (Nasr, 1992: 5). Besides, the fact that Nicholson has classified *Mathnawi* - a book of Persian mystical poems in rhyming couplets, mainly with didactic, romantic, and heroic themes written by Jalaluddin Rumi - "a work so famous and venerated that it has been styled «The Koran of Persia»"(Nicholson, 2007: 96), indicates the extent to which the reading of mystical poetry has been a tradition among Iranians.

From the eleventh century until modern times, the influence of the mystical ideas of Sufism on Iranian poetry was so strong that most important poets in Iran were Sufis or had mystical ideas<sup>10</sup>. About the popularity of Sufi poetry Ghani, one of the "prominent Iranian literary historians of this century", says:

Because of the illustrative brilliance of their verse, Sufi poetry came to be widely diffused and popular, in turn giving great social impact to Sufism....Sufism gave poetry a new and independent lease on life,

broadening its conceptual scope and imaginative power, effectively transforming it into a public art-form (Lewisohn, 1992: 15).

It is because of this strong impact that Zarrinkub (1978:17), "one of the most distinguished scholars of Persian Sufi literature", states that Persian poetry of classical times was so extensively influenced by Sufi philosophy that every lyric poet of that period was a Sufi, as nearly every great Sufi of the time was a poet.

Yet, if Sufism could so deeply influence Iranian culture, it was not only due to a strong tendency of Iranians towards poetry, but also due to the impact of Sufism on the conservation and development of the Persian language, something which was extremely important for the Iranian people. While the language used by most Iranian scientists and philosophers after the domination by Arabs was Arabic, the language used by most Sufis was Persian. There were three paramount

<sup>10</sup> Concerning this issue Schimmel is of the opinion that: "Persian lyrics would never have acquired their peculiar charm without the Sufi theories; these are the background upon which this poetry develops, and the tension between the worldly and the religious

interpretation of life is resolved, in the poems of the outstanding masters of this art, in a perfect harmony of the spiritual, psychic, and sensual components." (Schimmel, 1975, p.288)

reasons for Sufis to employ the Persian language. Firstly, since the Sufis were not interested in scientific or scholastic discussions but only wanted to express their deepest feelings for "the Absolute", they could not use a language which was not their own mother tongue. If love, according to Sufi, cannot be learned, nor can the language expressing this love be a learned language like Arabic.

The second reason was that using Persian was indeed a kind of resistance against orthodox Muslims, especially *fuqaha* (Islamic jurists), who were the main opponents of Sufis. The Sufis rejected the orthodox idea that the only way of understanding the existence of God and achieving His mercy was acquiring religious knowledge (*ilm*). According to Sufis, the path of love (*ishq*), not the path of knowledge (*ilm*), is the right way to reach God and for becoming one with Him. There were also Sufis (by some scholars called as *arifs*) who, although they promoted the path of love, did not totally reject the path of knowledge as one of the ways of reaching God. By reciting poems, instead of acquiring religious knowledge, Sufis wanted to humiliate

these men of knowledge, especially those who pretended to devote their whole life to the study of such religious knowledge. In doing this, Sufis were not obliged to use Arabic. Persian could very well serve the purpose.

The third reason for Sufis to employ the Persian language was the maintenance of contact with the people - something which for a long time was not so easy for Sufis due to the hostility of orthodox Muslims towards them. Persian was the only language which common people, who were the main audience of Sufi poems, could understand.

The Sufis using Persian as their main language had an important impact on the survival and development of this language. Thus, if New Persian finally became the main administrative and literary language of not only Iran but also Central Asia and Transoxiana and the lingua franca of an extensive area in West, South and Central Asia, stretching from Turkey over the Caucasus and Central Asia to the Indian Subcontinent and

Chinese Turkestan in the east<sup>11</sup>, it was partly due to the Sufis' attempt to use this language in their poetry. For this reason, Iranians, for whom the survival of their language as an important way to keep their identity has always been an essential issue, have during the centuries cherished their mystical poets and tried to make their ideas survive.

Summarizing the preceding discussion we may emphasize the following: (1) The familiarity of Iranians with mystical ideas already before the introduction of Sufism; (2) the domination of Shi'ism in Iran from the 16th century; (3) the special political situation of Iran after the invasion by the Mongols and the Sufis' especial conception of Divine justice; (4) the use of Persian by Sufis as their main language; these are some of the important factors which made Sufism not only an important religious ethos in Iran, but also an integral part of Iranian culture. It is mainly because of its place in the life of Iranians that we can talk about the impact of Sufi ideas on

the ways of thinking of Iranians, especially on their conception of man.

In this article, I have focused on the reasons for taking up mysticism as an important element in Iranian thought. For better understanding the consequences of the impact of Sufism in the Iranian everyday life even today, it is needed to investigate the concept of man in Persian Sufism (Irano-Islamic mysticism); i.e. to inquire into how a person constructs a concept of her/himself by adopting a certain concept of man and her/his relationship with God. In this respect, it is essential to pay attention to the idea of the Unity of Existence in Sufism as an obstacle barring the development of the concept of the individual in the Iranian ways of thinking and consequently preventing the emergence of a differentiation between one's own "self" and "other selves". I aim to discuss this issue in another article.

---

<sup>11</sup> In addition, Persian language was an important language in India. It inspired also the development of Urdu and a part of Ottoman-Turkish literature.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my special thanks to my dear colleague Mr. Saeid Zandi who helped me finalize this text.

## Conflict of interest


The article has only one writer; there is no conflict of interest.

## Bibliography

- [1] Arberry, A. J., (1963). *The Legacy of Persia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [2] Ashtiani, J., (1988). *Zartosht, Mazd-e Yasna va Hokumat (Zoroaster, Mazd-e Yasna and Government)*. Tehran: Enteshar Press. (In Persian)
- [3] Binyon, L., (1935). *The Spirit of Man in Asian Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [4] Corbin, H., (1991). *En Isalm Iranien, aspect spirituels et philosophiques, II, sohrawardi et les platoniciens de perse*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
- [5] Corbin, H., (1971). *En Isalm Iranien, aspect spirituels et philosophiques, I, le shiisme duodecimain*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
- [6] Corbin, H., (1993). *History of Islamic Philosophy*. London: Kegan Paul International.
- [7] Corbin, H., (1976). *Philosophie iranienne et philosophie comparée*. Tran. Seyyed Javad Tabataba'i. Tehran: Toos Press. (In Persian)
- [8] Corbin, H., (1986). *Temple and Contemplation*. London: Islamic Publications.
- [9] Danner, V., (1988). *The Islamic Tradition: An Introduction*. New York: Amity House.
- [10] Gabrieli, F., (1995). *Literary Tendencies*. In *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization* ed. G. E. von Grunebaum. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- [11] Gnoli, G., (1980). *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland, A Study of the Origins of Mazdaism and Related Problems*. Institut Universitario Orientale, Seminario Di Studi Asiatici, Series Minor VII. Naples.
- [12] Hodgson, M. G. S., (1977). *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in World Civilization. Vol. II*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [13] Khadduri, M., (1984). *The Islamic Conception of Justice*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- [14] Lewisohn, L., (1992). *Overview: Iranian Islam and Persianate Sufism*. In *The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn, 11-43. London: Oneworld Publications.
- [15] Moulton, J. H., (1913). *Early Zoroasterianism*. London: Williams and Norgate.
- [16] Nasr, S. H., (1992). *Persian Sufi Literature: its Spiritual and Cultural Significance*. In *The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism*, ed. L. Lewisohn. London. Oneworld Publications.
- [17] Nasr, S. H., (1968). *Science and Civilization in Islam*. Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society.
- [18] Nasr, S. H., (1972). *Sufi Essays*. London: George Allan and Unwin Ltd.
- [19] Nicholson, R. A., (2007). *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'din Rumi*. Tehran: Sotudeh Publications.
- [20] Nicholson, R. A., (1989). *Mystics of Islam*. London: Arkana.
- [21] Schimmel, A., (1975). *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- [22] Tabataba'i, S. J., (1994). *Zaval-e andisheye-e sysasi dar Iran. (The Decline of Political Thought in Iran)*. Tehran: Kavir Publishing. (In Persian)
- [23] Zarrinkub, A., (1978). *Arzeshe mirase suffiye (The Legacy of Sufism)*. Tehran: Amirkabir Publishing Co. (In Persian)

## ادغام اندیشه‌های صوفیانه در طرز فکر ایرانیان



فرشته احمدی<sup>۱</sup> 

<sup>۱</sup> استاد جامعه‌شناسی، گروه مددکاری اجتماعی و جرم‌شناسی، دانشکده مطالعات شغلی و سلامت، دانشگاه یوله، یوله، سوئد.

**چکیده:** در این مقاله به موضوع ادغام اندیشه‌های صوفیانه در طرز فکر ایرانیان پرداخته شده است. عواملی مورد طرح قرار می‌گیرند که به تبیین دلایل تأثیرگذاری اندیشه‌های صوفیانه بر طرز تفکر ایرانیان و یکپارچه شدن آن‌ها با این طرز فکر می‌پردازند. این موضوع از آن جهت حائز اهمیت است که یکی از دلایل معضلات اجتماعی که جامعه ایرانی از آن‌ها رنج می‌برد را می‌توان در تفکر گروه‌محور ایرانی و فقدان نگاه فردمحور به حقوق و وظایف هر شهروند جستجو کرد. بعد عرفانی طرز فکر ایرانیان یکی از عواملی تلقی می‌گردد که با تحول توجه به خویشتن فردی در طرز تفکر ایرانیان به مقابله برخاست.

**واژه‌های کلیدی:** صوفی‌گری، نگرش ذهنی، عرفان اسلامی، تصوف، عرفان ایرانی.

پژوهشگاه علوم انسانی و مطالعات فرهنگی  
پرتال جامع علوم انسانی