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TRANSFORMATION OF TASAWUF: STUDY OF THE THIRD AND FOURTH CENTURIES OF HIJRIAH

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of Sufism during the 3rd and 4th centuries Hijri, tracing its evolution from an ascetic lifestyle (zuhd) into a systematic spiritual discipline. Initially, Sufism emerged as a response to the socio-political turbulence, material excess, and spiritual decline among Muslims following the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods. Over time, Sufism underwent significant changes in form, focus, and dissemination. Sufi scholars began codifying spiritual concepts such as maqām, ḥāl, fanā', and ma'rifah, and established organized institutions and Sufi orders (ṭarīqah) for spiritual training. Using a qualitative-historical approach based on library research, this study shows that the transformation of Sufism was not only driven by internal dynamics but also shaped by broader theological, philosophical, and political developments of the Abbasid era. As a result, Sufism emerged as a distinct and influential intellectual and spiritual tradition within Islam.

INTRODUCTION

Tasawuf is a discipline within Islamic teachings that focuses on spiritual and inner dimensions. Also known as Sufism, it seeks to cultivate a deeper understanding of the relationship between an individual and God, while striving for divine love, purity of heart, and blessings in one's daily life. The practice of Tasawuf emphasizes the importance of seeking spiritual meaning, developing the soul, and heightening one's awareness of God's presence in every aspect of life (Elementa Media Literasi, 2024).

As part of the intellectual and practical treasures of Muslims, Sufism was not suddenly born in perfect form. At the beginning of its development, Sufism was more inclined to be an ascetic movement. That's why the initial phase of Sufism is called the phase of asceticism or asceticism (Faradina Setiorini, 2024).

Historically, this phase of Sufism characterized by asceticism emerged as a reaction to chaotic socio-political conditions and worldly extravagance. At least three factors prompted Muslims to withdraw from social life: the formalization of Islamic religious practices, internal conflicts, and social inequality (Randi Saputra, 2021).

However, during the third and fourth centuries of the Hijri era, Sufism underwent a significant transformation compared to its earlier phase. This shift marked the evolution of Sufism from a simple ascetic lifestyle into a structured system of knowledge, complete with its own terminology, methodology, and even specialized institutions for instruction. Sufi figures began producing works that systematically organized Sufi teachings, introducing concepts such as maqām (spiritual station), ḥāl (spiritual state), fanā

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(annihilation of the self), and baqā (subsistence in God) all of which serve as the foundation for a Sufi's spiritual experience. This period also saw the emergence of prominent figures such as al-Muḥāsibī, Junaid al-Baghdādī, and al-Qushayrī who laid the groundwork for Sufism to emerge as a distinct academic and spiritual discipline.

This transformation reflects not only internal developments within Sufism itself but was also influenced by external contexts such as advancements in ilm al-kalam (theology), philosophy, and fiqh (jurisprudence) as well as the socio-political shifts that occurred under the Abbasid Caliphate. Consequently, understanding the evolution of Sufism during the third and fourth centuries AH is essential for grasping how it forged its identity as a distinct discipline and spiritual practice within the Islamic tradition.

METHODS

This study employs a library research method to collect relevant data and information from various sources, such as books, scholarly journals, articles, and other documents. This approach enables the researcher to review existing literature, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the concepts, theories, and findings previously presented by experts in the field.

The study utilizes a qualitative-historical approach, which aims to develop an in-depth understanding of phenomena based on the perspectives of participants or data sources. Consequently, this method helps identify existing knowledge, strengthens the arguments presented, and provides a comprehensive historical and theoretical foundation for the topic under investigation. Furthermore, this approach ensures that the research is firmly grounded in verified sources, rendering the findings more valid and academically accountable.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to al-Jauzi and Ibn Khaldun, the spiritual life in Islam can be broadly divided into two categories: zuhud (asceticism) and tasawuf (Sufism). Tasawuf can be understood as a tradition encompassing aspects of spiritual life, the purification of the soul, and methods for cleansing oneself of various spiritual ailments and worldly temptations. Furthermore, tasawuf teaches ways to draw closer to Allah SWT through profound spiritual experiences, ultimately leading to a state of fana (annihilation of the self) within His eternity.

Before emerging as a distinct field of study, tasawuf began simply as a modest lifestyle practiced by individuals; it later evolved into an educational tradition with its own formal discipline, eventually giving rise to a body of written works.

A. **Sufism Before the 3rd Century AH: The Phase of Asceticism (Zuhd**)

In its initial phase, Sufism was not yet known by that term; rather, it existed as a set of spiritual practices such as zuhd (asceticism/detachment from the world), wara (scrupulous piety), and various other acts of worship. These teachings were developed by figures such as Abdullah ibn Umar and Hasan al-Basri, while the concept of love for God (mahabbah) was later introduced by Rabia al-Adawiyya.

This ascetic way of life was also shaped by the socio-political conditions of the era a situation that underwent a radical transformation under the Umayyad dynasty, reaching a critical turning point with the killing of Husayn ibn Ali at Karbala. This event had a profound impact on the Muslim community, leading to the emergence of a group known as the Tawwabin individuals who feeling guilty for having supported the Umayyad dynasty, they sought to cleanse themselves through acts of intense worship.

Beyond political conflict, the social conditions of the era also contributed to the emergence of zuhud (asceticism). As society began to embrace opulence straying far from the simplicity that characterized the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) pious individuals felt compelled to advocate for zuhud: a life of simplicity, free from the pursuit of worldly desires. These circumstances fostered a collective yearning to return to the modest lifestyle of the Prophet's era, which served as the backdrop for the spread of zuhud practices.

In its fundamental sense, zuhud denotes wara (religious caution) that is, abstaining from what is forbidden (haram). However, within the context of Sufism, the meaning of zuhud extends further. While halal (permissible) in sharia refers to anything that does not violate God's laws, halal in the Sufi sense refers to anything that does not cause one to forget God.

As a tenet of tasawwuf (Sufism), zuhud entails an awareness and a direct connection between the human being and the Divine a manifestation of ihsan (spiritual excellence) and a stage on the path toward ma'rifah (gnosis/direct knowledge of God). As an aspect of Islamic ethics, zuhud represents the attitude that every Muslim should adopt toward worldly life.

Zuhud is the disposition of an individual who values the afterlife more than worldly affairs, and who feels no inclination to indulge in or become attached to the life of this world. Those who practice zuhud view material possessions as trivial mere obstacles to attaining ma'rifah.

A person who embodies zuhudis characterized by the following: they do not rejoice over what they possess; they remain unperturbed by insults and unmoved by praise; and their hearts are filled solely with the fear, longing, and love for God.

B. The Transformation of Sufism in the 3rd and 4th Centuries AH: From Spiritual Practice to a Discipline of Knowledge

Entering the 3rd and 4th centuries AH, the Islamic world experienced significant advancement under the rule of the Abbasid Dynasty. The Abbasid administrative system was established by Abu al-Abbas and Abu Ja'far al-Manshur, with its center in the city of Baghdad. Its golden age occurred during the reigns of Harun al-Rashid and his son, al-Ma'mun a period characterized by prosperity, abundant wealth, and the rapid development of the sciences.

However, this progress brought unintended consequences: society became increasingly defined by luxury, materialism, and a formalistic approach to religion. Religious matters were frequently debated through the lens of logic by the mutakallimun (theologians), while the spirit of inward devotion and a simple way of life began to fade.

It was against this backdrop that Sufism emerged as a response to religious formalism and spiritual emptiness. Many Muslims particularly those who yearned for the purity of the era of the Prophet and his companions felt that kalam (theology) and fiqh (jurisprudence) alone were insufficient for drawing closer to God on a spiritual level. Consequently, spiritual practices rooted in zuhud (asceticism) began to take shape, eventually evolving into what is known as Sufism.

The prevalence of luxury and vice served as the primary catalyst for the emergence of Sufism as a formal discipline, giving rise to scholars and experts in the field. According to Sufi scholars, zuhud entails repenting for one's sins by renouncing one's worldly possessions a condition deemed necessary for the acceptance of such repentance.

From the third century AH onwards, the Sufis began to focus their attention on matters concerning the human soul and conduct. The development of Sufi doctrines and practices was marked by an effort to uphold morality amidst the decadence that prevailed at the time; consequently, through their efforts, Sufism (tasawuf) flourished ...religious moral science or the science of religious ethics.15 During this period, a concrete transition from asceticism within Islam toward Sufism became evident. This phase, also referred to as the second phase, is marked by the shift in terminology from zahid (ascetic) to Sufi. Furthermore, the third century was characterized by a group of Sufi scholars who sought to examine the core tenets of the Sufism that was developing at the time, categorizing them into three types:

First, Sufism centered on the science of the soul ('ilm al-nafs), which provides a comprehensive method for healing the soul by focusing the human psyche upon the Creator (al-Khaliq), thereby effectively resolving psychological tensions caused by worldly influences. This aspect of Sufism serves as a theoretical foundation for modern psychiatry.

Second, Sufism centered on the science of ethics (ilm al-akhlaq), which contains guidance on how to perform good deeds and avoid evil.

Third, Sufism centered on metaphysics, which encompasses teachings that describe the oneness of the Divine Essence the only true existence in an absolute sense as well as the attributes of God, which serve as the locus for His tajalli (manifestation).

The Sufi teachings that developed during this period included: First, al-ma'rifah (gnosis/knowledge), which entails the ability to perceive God or to feel a sense of closeness to Him. Second, al-fana' wa al-baqa' (annihilation and subsistence), which signifies the realization that the physical realm is merely a temporary illusion. Third, al-hulul (indwelling), the belief that God resides within every human being. These forms of Sufism served as a remedy for the materialistic tendencies prevalent in society.

Meanwhile, during this period, the discourse among the zahid (ascetics) had extended to questions regarding the nature of a pure soul, the essence of morality, the methods for cultivating it, and other

theoretical issues. As a result of these discussions, various theories emerged concerning the stages a Sufi must traverse, as well as the characteristics associated with a Sufi at each specific level.

By the third and fourth centuries, Sufism had taken on a character defined by fana (ecstasy) a state tending toward the union of the servant with the Creator. There was widespread discussion about "dissolving into the Beloved" (fana' fi al-mahbub), "uniting with the Beloved" (ittihad bi al-mahbub), "remaining eternally with the Beloved" (baqa' bi al-mahbub), "witnessing the Divine" (musyahadah), "encountering the Divine" (liqa), and "becoming one with the Divine" (ayn al-jam). Abu Yazid al-Bushtami is credited as the first to employ the term *fana'*, effectively laying the foundation for this doctrine.

Following Abu Yazid al-Bushtami, another prominent Sufi, al-Hallaj, emerged, introducing the theory of hulul (the indwelling of the Divine). In al-Luma, al-Tusi defines hulul as follows: "God selects a physical form to inhabit with the essence of Lordship (rububiyyah), while the human essence (bashariyyah) dissolves within it.

Al-Hallaj posited that human beings possess two natures: the human and the Divine, and that God created humanity in His own image. He based this on Surah Sad, verse 72, of the Quran, which suggests that human beings consist of two elements the physical and the spiritual with the former derived from material substance and the latter from the Spirit of God. Towards the end of the third century AH, a new development emerged in the history of Sufism, marked by the appearance of educational and instructional institutions dedicated to the study of Sufism and the practice of spiritual exercises. Each of these institutions possessed its own distinct and varied approach to Sufi instruction. It is from this context that the term thariqah (or tarekat) originated.

The tariqa (Sufi order) that emerged at the end of the third century was introduced by Junaid al-Baghdadi a Sufi master and the architect of the tariqa system who established the framework of shaykh, murshid (spiritual guide), murid (disciple), and murad (one who is sought/guided by God). Consequently, Junaid became known as Shaykh al-Ta'ifah ("Leader of the Group").

Thus, by the third century, Sufism had evolved to the point of having distinct schools of thought appearing, in effect, as an independent religious tradition. Abu al-Wafa asserts that Sufism in the third century leaned heavily toward the "psycho-moral" realm, with a primary focus on ethics and conduct.

Sufism experienced even more rapid development in the fourth century AH than it had in the third, driven by the dedicated efforts of Sufi scholars to expand their respective teachings. As a result, Baghdad previously the sole major hub for Sufi activity began to face competition from other prominent cities. The expansion of Sufi teachings beyond Baghdad was spearheaded by several scholars renowned for their profound knowledge, including:

a. Musa al-Ansari, who taught Sufism in Khurasan (Persia/Iran), where he passed away in 320 AH.
b. Abu Hamid bin Muhammad al-Rubazi, who taught in Egypt, where he passed away in 322 AH.
c. Abu Zaid al-Adami, who taught in the Arabian Peninsula, where he passed away in 314 AH.
d. Abu Ali Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab al-Saqafi, who taught in Nishapur and Shiraz until his death in 328 AH

In disseminating Sufi teachings across these various regions and cities, these scholars employed the tariqa system, following the model pioneered by their predecessors. The system consists of instruction provided by a teacher to their students which is theoretical in nature along with direct guidance on how to put it into practice; in the teachings of Sufism, this is known as suluk. This system of Sufi instruction, often referred to as A tariqa (Sufi order) is often named after its founder (the teacher), or sometimes after the circumstances surrounding its inception.

Another characteristic of the development of Sufism in the fourth century was the emergence of written works on the subject, such as Qūt al-Qulūb fī Muʿāmalāt al-Maḥbūb by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī. Furthermore, the nature of Sufism during this century became increasingly influenced by philosophy, as many philosophical texts translated by Muslim scholars since the time of the Abbasid Dynasty had begun to circulate among the Muslim community. It was also during this century that a distinction began to be drawn between ʻilm al-ẓāhir (exoteric knowledge) and ʻilm al-bāṭin (esoteric knowledge), which Sufi scholars categorized into four types:

a. Ilm al-Sharīʻah (The Knowledge of Sharīʻah)

Sharīʻah refers to the laws governing the relationship between human beings and God, as well as the relationships among human beings themselves, based on the Qur'an and the ḥadīth. If a matter is not explicitly addressed in these two sources, the ruling is determined through ijmā (the consensus of knowledgeable and trusted scholars) and qiyās (legal analogy based on similar, previously established cases).

b. Ilm al-Ṭarīqah (The Knowledge of Ṭarīqah)

Ṭarīqah is a method or path for drawing closer to God under the guidance of a teacher, known as a murshid. A murshid possesses a chain of transmission (silsilah) that connects them through the continuous passing of knowledge from teacher to student all the way back to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Typically, a murshid receives a formal authorization or ijazah from their own teacher, serving as proof of their legitimacy to guide students.

c. Ilm al-Ḥaqīqah (The Knowledge of Ḥaqīqah)

Ḥaqīqah refers to essential truth. It denotes an esoteric reality that marks the boundaries of human and theological transcendence. Ḥaqīqah constitutes the third element, following Sharī'ah (law), which represents the exoteric reality; Tariqah (the path) serves as the stage of esotericism; and the third is Haqiqah, which is the essential truth.

d. The Knowledge of Ma'rifah

Ma'rifah is a profound, clear, and certain knowledge of God, attained through the inner heart (sanubari). Al-Ghazali provides a detailed explanation of ma'rifah, defining it through the following points:

1) Ma'rifah entails knowing the secrets of God and the divine laws that encompass all that exists;
2) An individual who has attained ma'rifah resides in close proximity to God to the extent that they may behold His Countenance;
3) Ma'rifah precedes mahabbah (divine love).

C. Forms of Transformation

The transition from Sufism prior to the 3rd century AH (the ascetic phase) to the Sufism of the 3rd and 4th centuries AH is clearly evident in several aspects, including:

1. Form (The manner in which Sufism is practiced)

   During the zuhud (ascetic) phase, the spiritual approach was personal and unstructured. A zahid (an ascetic) would lead a simple life, withdraw from the world, and focus on acts of worship without any systematic guidance. However, by the 3rd and 4th centuries AH, Sufism began to take shape as a formal discipline ('ilm). It was no longer merely practiced; it was taught methodically and studied much like other branches of knowledge. This period saw the emergence of written works, the establishment of teacher-student relationships, and the formation of halaqah (study circles) characterized by diverse approaches.

2. Primary Focus

   During the zuhud period, the spiritual focus centered primarily on renouncing the world and fearing the punishments of the Hereafter a phase dominated by the spirit of asceticism and apprehension. In its theoretical phase, Sufism shifts toward a dimension of deeper spiritual experience, namely ma'rifah (direct knowledge of God), mahabbah (divine love), and fanā (the dissolution of the ego in the presence of God). A more personal and mystical vertical relationship begins to be theorized.

3. Writing/Codification

   The zuhud (asceticism) phase produced almost no written works. All teachings were conveyed orally and took the form of brief pieces of counsel. Beginning in the 3rd and 4th centuries AH, Sufis started composing books to elucidate their teachings, safeguard Sufism from deviation, and defend its existence against criticisms from scholars of fiqh (jurisprudence) or kalam (theology). Examples include al-Luma, Qūt al-Qulūb, and al-Ta'arruf.

4. During

   The zuhud period, technical terminology did not yet exist. Everything was simple and remained uncodified. In the theoretical phase, however, Sufis began to develop specialized terminology to describe the stages of the spiritual journey such as maqām, fanā, baqā, ma'rifah, maḥabbah, and others. These terms subsequently became the foundational elements for the teachings and discourses of later Sufism.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of Sufism during the 3rd and 4th centuries AH represents a significant dynamic in the spiritual history of Islam. Initially emerging as a form of simple, ascetic, individual piety, Sufism evolved into a scholarly system characterized by its own concepts, methodologies, and institutions. This shift was driven not only by the internal dynamics of Sufi teachings but also by the socio-political and intellectual context of the Islamic world during the Abbasid era.

This transformative phase was marked by the codification of spiritual terminology such as maqām, ḥāl, fanā, baqā, and ma'rifah the emergence of key figures like Junaid al-Baghdadi and al-Muhasibi, and the development of pedagogical systems through ṭarīqah (Sufi orders). Sufism ceased to be merely a private, personal practice; instead, it became a systematic discipline, spreading across various regions and making a profound contribution to shaping the spiritual dimension of Islam. Consequently, understanding this phase is essential to grasping how Sufism grew from a simple spiritual expression into a deep, well-established intellectual and practical Islamic legacy.

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