

## Sufism and Early Islamic Piety

*Sufism and Early Islamic Piety: Personal and Communal Dynamics* offers a new story about the formative period of Sufism. Through a fresh reading of diverse Sufi and non-Sufi sources, Arin Shawkat Salamah-Qudsi reveals the complexity of personal and communal aspects of Sufi piety in the period between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. Her study also sheds light on the interrelationships and conflicts of early Sufis through emphasizing that early Sufism was neither a quietist nor a completely individual mode of piety. Salamah-Qudsi reveals how the early Sufis' commitment to the Islamic ideal of family life led to different creative arrangements among them in order to avoid contradictions with this ideal and the mystical ideal of solitary life. Her book enables a deeper understanding of the development of Sufism in light of the human concerns and motivations of its founders.

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Arin Salamah-Qudsi  
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*Personal and Communal Dynamics*

ARIN SHAWKAT SALAMAH-QUDSI

*University of Haifa*



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In loving memory of my father  
Shawkat Salamah (1947–2008)



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## Preface

A well-established fashion among scholars of Sufism during recent decades is to mark the early phase of Sufism, before the fourth/tenth century, as a period of individualism, self-marginalization and a radical life of renunciation, while marking Sufism after that period with clear social and communal impact and formulations. Some important communal aspects of early Sufism, integrated with certain personal and interpersonal aspects in the lives of Sufi personalities, have been underestimated in earlier scholarship. My argument here is that the fabric of early Sufism, prior to the fourth/tenth century, included many more community-based elements than previously thought and that there were stronger communal tendencies in early Sufism than many scholars have shown. This project seeks to explore such tendencies.

The paradigmatic attempt of distinguishing early Sufism with individuality and later Sufism with communal tendencies should be replaced by a multifaceted viewpoint, according to which both individuality and communality are relevant to each phase in the development of Sufism. Early Sufism, thereby, should be treated as a crucible of various modes of personal and spiritual life, as well as of diverse human concerns, interpersonal relationships and conflicts.

It is true that the process of establishing the collective identity of the Sufis reached its peak by embodying the boundaries of Sufi activities and doctrinal systems in the framework of detailed manuals and compendia during the fourth/tenth century. Meanwhile, the earlier stage could also witness certain constituents of this identity. Different forms of connection, interaction and networks between early Sufi figures in undertaking certain kinds of ascetic exercises were not uncommon according to the available sources.

The established scholarly fondness of narrating the story of hostility between Sufi and non-Sufi parties – that could very often become fraught with ideological controversies, polemical interchanges and codes of persecution and violence – presupposes by its very essence the existence of such a coherent group of pious men in the early medieval Islamic landscapes called *ṣūfiyya*. As a result of this presupposition, *ṣūfiyya* became distinguished with clear collective features, and no room was given to detailed discussions of the individual cases of those personalities who acted within the boundaries of that group and had different ambitions, codes of behaviour, life choices and destinies.

Articulating the inter-Sufi confrontations and friction points could, more than the narrative of ‘Sufi vs. anti-Sufi confrontation’, help us establish our argument that early Sufism was, since its very beginnings, founded on personal differences beside certain communal activities that led to distinguishing the early Sufis as a group.

I am looking to make two basic assumptions here: The first is that more communal and collective operations could be traced to early Sufis, and those should be surveyed and examined, and the other is that the very feature of individuality in reference to early Sufism needs to be redefined. When we refer to individuality in Sufi studies, we directly think about the quietest mode of piety, which is believed to have been undertaken by the early Sufis of Iraq. I would suggest introducing other components to the concept of individuality in this context. In addition to particular individual modes of piety and the quietest undertakings, individuality also had to do with questions like how early Sufis were as family members and how they managed to work their interpersonal ties, which were sometimes fraught with controversies and conflicts in both their particular Sufi communities as well as in the wider Muslim society. Individuality in this sense should also be treated as a broad sphere of mutual influences and interactions. Individual aspects should be observed and analysed in their encounters with communal aspects, and vice versa, the communal aspects of early Sufis’ lives should be also reconsidered through their interconnections with more individual aspects of life.

Early foundations of the dynamics of influence and interaction between the personal and the communal spheres of the early Sufis’ lives are present in the available sources, as this study will show. Modes of operation within the boundaries of Sufis’ communal lives could influence the familial engagements of those Sufis. Meanwhile, in certain cases, familial and personal aspects could leave their marks on the different forms of operation within Sufi communal commitments and engagements.

This study seeks to tell the story of early Sufis in the period between the third/ninth and seventh/thirteenth centuries, from a new perspective in the field: to place the personal and interpersonal narratives in the lives of those Sufis in the foreground, to examine their familial ties and engagements, and to provide insight into the communal dynamics and confrontations within early Sufi circles in their search for a compromise between the mystic's way of life on the one hand and the obligations of normative religion and of normative Sufi conduct and ethos on the other.

By 'personal and interpersonal narratives', I refer to early Sufi personalities within their families and to their forms of interaction with other family members, in particular women, mothers and maternal uncles. In addition, personal dynamics include issues like celibacy and marriage among early Sufis and the different forms of approaching those situations. The wish of the early Sufis to be committed to the Islamic ideal of family life led to different creative arrangements among them in order to avoid contradictions with both this ideal and the mystical ideal of seclusion and solitary life.

By 'communal dynamics', I refer to early Sufis' interactions with other Sufis and the different forms of engagement in Sufi communities. These interactions include tensions, conflicts and quarrels.

In addition to examining the personal and the communal domains of early Sufis' lives, each by itself, I intend to examine the intergraded dynamics between the two domains as they appear in the sources. The different forms of relationship between the personal lives of Sufi individuals and their wider communal lives under their Sufi communities are an additional focus of my work.

Studying Sufi personalities in their familial and close communal circles is essential for unveiling the hard core of the early Sufi movement and also central to understanding the nature of the evolution of this movement in its early phase as a whole.

#### TOPIC AND STRUCTURE

My intention is to explore Sufi writings of the period under investigation in light of the most recent results of scholarship in this field. Both Sufi and non-Sufi texts will be examined as instruments to reconstruct the individual fragments and interpersonal ties of early Sufis. My access to the primary sources is confined to works in Arabic and Persian. A survey of the different types of primary sources on which this study relied will be included in the **Introduction**. Among these, I would mention *ādāb*

literature (Sufi rules of ethics), Sufi letters and correspondence, which I consider a good source for some personal ideas and fragments that were not included in the famous Sufi compendia and *magna opera*. In addition, Sufi hagiographies, autobiographies, introductory sections in Sufi writings, non-Sufi sources such as works of *adab*, chronicles, non-Sufi biographies, travel literature, anti-Sufi literature and both religious and polemic literature should also be consulted. In the underlying argument undertaken here, an attempt is presented to reconsider the scholarly value of hagiographic material as a literary basis able to embed certain social and interpersonal shifts in the actual lives of early Sufis.

The twentieth century witnessed the publication of significant monographs on prominent Sufi figures, in most of which the philological approach was undertaken. In addition, the growing interest among scholars in the history of Sufi orders has prompted an upsurge of collective monographs dedicated to particular Sufi *ṭarīqas*, and more studies of this type have been undertaken by anthropologists. Such new studies are rarely accurate in the treatment they offer of the spiritual life of these personalities. Individual monographs imply, by their very definition, the crucial role of distinct Sufi personalities. The starting point in these types of monographs is the suggestion that particular Sufi individuals are interesting for their uniqueness and singularity, and therefore, they deserve, more than others, detailed studies of their lives and teachings.

My book covers several early Sufi individuals. A focus is put on how the disparate personal and interpersonal tendencies within the family or the community dynamics of these individuals contributed to shaping their distinctive spiritual worldviews, each of which played a fundamental role in creating the spiritual and practical ethos of early Sufis, and in consolidating their unique identity as a distinctive spiritual group.

#### THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

I chose to divide the study into two parts, demonstrating two sets of narratives. **Part I** presents an analysis of the personal narratives, while **Part II** examines the communal narratives and different modes of operation that were undertaken by early Sufis in the framework of their lives within Sufi communities in particular and medieval Muslim societies in general. The **Introduction** will briefly introduce the general climate of the period under investigation and review the modern research literature and

the expected innovation of the current study; present the working hypotheses, method and design; and, finally, survey in great detail the types of sources and suggested methods to benefit from them.

This will allow me to articulate my basic argument that early Sufism was founded on personal-individual differences in addition to certain communal activities, and that individuality in this domain should not be restricted to the quietest mode of piety that is believed to have been undertaken by the Sufis of the formative phase; rather, it should involve real personal domains, like how early Sufis acted as family members and the way they managed to work their interpersonal ties in their Sufi communities and wider Muslim society.

Beginning with the personal perspective, I suggest adding to its definition the family lives and their interconnections with the communal commitments of early Sufis. **Part I**, thereby, sheds light on a few cases of early Sufis whose lives reflect diversified forms of family life. **Chapter 1** focuses on the roles of early Sufis as family members, spouses and providers, while seeking to re-examine questions of celibacy and working for one's living among them. I gathered here many textual notions that reflect the attempts of certain Sufis to reconcile some ascetic practices like *siyāḥa* (roving in the deserts without taking provisions) with family duties and others that reflect different approaches towards the ascetic ideal of the priority of celibacy over marriage. The prominent premise behind **Chapter 2** is that the various dynamics to reconcile the demands of the increasingly established system of initiation into the Sufi community with family duties become more sophisticated when we approach female Sufis. I relied on Sufi and non-Sufi biographical collections to examine transformations in the Sufi approach towards women and to present an attempt to uncover, through the limited evidences offered by the sources, the different voices and options that these women had. Both **Chapters 3** and **4** present additional support for my argument that the development of early Sufism could, interestingly, be narrated and viewed from the perspective of Sufis' personal lives, along the line between one's own familial commitments and that of the system of affiliation to the Sufi life, which over time gathered clear communal-collective characteristics. **Chapter 3** offers stories of certain mothers who were Sufis themselves as well as mothers of Sufi figures, while **Chapter 4** focuses on maternal uncles who played fundamental roles in the Sufi careers of their nephews. Studying nephew-maternal uncle relationships in early Sufi spheres, despite the problematic nature of the available material, could shed light on additional points of conjunction between the personal and the communal aspects of life on both

sides. When the Sufi master is the maternal uncle, the boundaries between the family space and the Sufi space, where the devotee gets his spiritual guidance, dissolve to become one integrative unit.

Examining the diversified forms of communication that were adopted by certain Sufis with their counterparts in the framework of Sufi communal lives is the topic of **Part II**. It is here where the personal-individual tendencies of the early Sufis meet the communal ethos that continued to be established throughout the first centuries of the development of Sufism. In **Chapter 5**, I seek to present what I call the lenient approaches of certain Sufis who introduced the idea of exempting new initiates from strict codes of behaviour and spiritual practice as a measure of facilitating broader and more solid recruitment. While this approach was not common in the early part of the considered period, it succeeded in the course of the sixth/twelfth century in becoming one of the major traits of the Sufi practical system and actual communal life of the Sufis of Islam. In addition to Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 298/910–911) and his lenient approach, this chapter discusses Sufi personalities who managed to gain positions of renown and fame within their communities ('consensually acclaimed Sufis', as I called them) such as Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz (d. 286/899 or a few years earlier) and Abū Ḥafṣ al-Ḥaddād (d. c. 265/878–879). In **Chapter 6**, a detailed discussion of the fourth/tenth century's interesting figure Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Niffarī (d. c. 354/965) is presented. Niffarī's marginalized case reflects a unique mode of medieval spirituality that essentially differs from what can be seen as the Sufi mainstream, which was anchored in the institution of *taṣawwuf*. Beside the representatives of the Sufi ethos on the one hand and those who chose to detach themselves completely from the communal life of institutionalized *taṣawwuf* on the other, **Chapter 7** examines individual tendencies and personal views that generated controversies and poignant conflicts among the Sufis themselves.

While it is considered to be one of the neglected facets of the relationships between the mystic as an individual and his wider community, the critical custom of companionship with youth (*ṣuḥbat al-aḥdāth*) is the topic of **Chapter 8**. Examining this topic could enrich our understanding of the diverse ways in which Sufis, particularly those whose names were associated with *ṣuḥbat al-aḥdāth*, as well as Sufi authors, used to accommodate certain personal patterns of behaviour with a general system of thought and norms constituting the collective Sufi identity. Particular controversial figures like Yūsuf b. al-Ḥusayn al-Rāzī are the main focus of my discussion here.

## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION, TRANSLATION AND DATES

Transliteration of Arabic and Persian in this book follows the system of transliteration adopted in *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)*. Wherever the proper nouns and concepts that appear are common in English, they are introduced without transliteration, such as ‘Sufi’ and ‘Sufism’.

The English translations of Arabic and Persian citations are the author’s unless otherwise stated. Dates include the *Hijrī* year followed by the Christian year.

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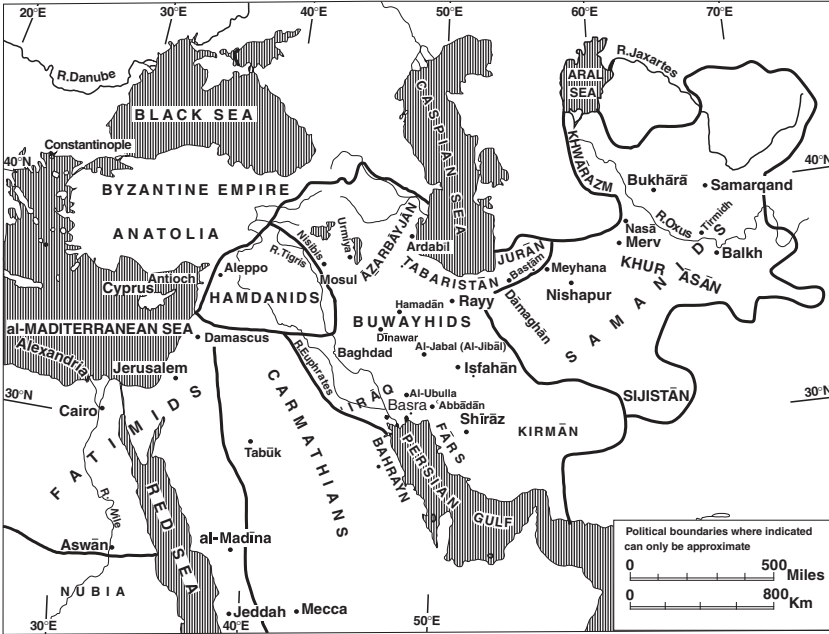
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Map 1 The central Islamic lands in the late fourth/tenth century.

Source: *The Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. IA: The Central Islamic Lands from Pre-Islamic Times to the First World War, ed. by P. M. Holt, Ann K. S. Lambton and Bernard Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, first published in 1970), 155.

