

Article

Between Words and Worlds: Masters' Sayings in Early Sufi Literature

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to examine the intersections between the corpus of sayings in the Sufi tradition and the changing realities in the period between the third/ninth and seventh/thirteenth centuries. The main hypothesis is that masters' sayings were neither expressions of abstract theories nor mere responses to changing forms of religious identities but rather a powerful engine for the shifts then occurring in the Sufi tradition as a whole. This notion is examined from two realms. The first is an examination of the ways Sufi sayings went far beyond being a vessel for mystical themes and acted as an effective instrument in the hands of Sufi masters in their quest for authority. Sufi sayings helped masters build the foundations for a shared Sufi "science" transmitted through generations of Sufis and contributed, thereby, to establishing a powerful collective identity and institution. In the second realm, this paper categorizes the bulk of sayings according to prevalent themes, structures, and performativity to propose major outlines of the development of these sayings across time. There were three significant phases in the development of Sufi sayings: the first refers to the late second/eighth and early third/ninth centuries; the second to the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries; and the third covers the period from the sixth/twelfth century onwards. Inspired by speech act theory and other theories on the performativity of language, I argue that Sufi sayings, including ecstatic utterances, were designated as social acts seeking to change the basics of religious consciousness.

Keywords: Sufi sayings; ecstatic utterances (*shaṭaḥāt*); Sufi anecdotes; works of belles-lettres (*adab*); Sufi textbooks; didactic sayings; aphorisms



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1. Introduction

In order to reconstruct the history and development of early Sufi Islam in the period between the third/ninth and seventh/thirteenth centuries, a huge body of Sufi sayings, written basically in Arabic but also in Persian, needs to be thoroughly examined. Sayings and ecstatic utterances (*shaṭaḥāt*) ascribed to different Sufi masters of that formative period and preserved in the major Sufi compendia and anthologies reflect the massive shifts that took place in the Sufi discourse and institutions across the centuries of their development.

Sufi sayings take many forms and rhetorical structures. They can explain a mystical term or theme, help illustrate a witty idea or intensely emotional experience or even take the form of a shocking or controversial phrase. Their most common form is that of short and pithy aphorisms which maintain what James Geary calls the "five laws of aphorisms": they are brief, definitive, personal, embedding a semantic twist, and commonly philosophical in their nature (Geary 2005, pp. 8–20). Though the term "Sufi sayings" implies an oral heritage of early Sufism, in fact, what has reached us is only what has been gathered and collected by the authors of the major Sufi textbooks produced from the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries onwards in Iraq and Persia. In all probability, Sufi sayings that were initially orally circulated in Sufi teaching sessions were included in the increasingly established Sufi literature not only because of their literary value, elaborate metaphors, and allusions that conveyed important Sufi ethics and theories but also due to their agency in changing the focus of religious beliefs and experiences and acting as a powerful directive–didactic engine.

Although many scholarly endeavors have been undertaken to investigate Sufi sayings and aphorisms, there has been no satisfying attempt to trace the development in their thematic and rhetorical structures. Carl Ernst's *Words of Ecstasy* (Ernst 1985) solely revolves around the ecstatic expressions of Sufi sayings and thoroughly examines their topics and forms. Jawid Mojaddedi, in his article on drunkenness and sobriety as a major typology in early Sufism (Mojaddedi 2003), examines the contrasting concepts of sobriety and drunkenness and the way the two distinct approaches, the ecstatic and intoxicated versus the sober and disciplined, were perceived and categorized within Sufi discourse of the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh. Michael Sells' *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Sells 1994) and more recently Aydogan Kars' *Unsayings God* (Kars 2019) follow the direction of many scholars who elaborated on the paradoxical and enigmatic characteristics of Sufi language. All these endeavors do not focus broadly on the evolution of Sufi sayings which are not restricted to ecstatic sayings and may encompass multifarious forms of sayings.

This article elaborates on the early Sufi body of sayings in an attempt to examine the position of these sayings in the Sufi training system through language socialization theories, speech act theory, and the performativity of utterances; it conducts this in order to explain their powerful effect, their “perlocutionary act” according to John Austin (Austin 1976, p. 118) and John Searle (Searle 1976, p. 3; Searle and Vanderveken 2005, pp. 118–19), and to categorize them according to prevailing rhetoric and themes.

2. Notes on the Contents, Sources, and Transmission of Sufi Sayings

While reading early prose-based Sufi works, one encounters numerous sayings and anecdotes that date back to Sufism's formative period. Kenneth Avery points to the existence of a “pool” of traditions from which authors of Sufi textbooks only preserved a certain amount (Avery 2014, p. 40). This material contains the following: witticisms, didactic stories, definitions of certain terms, references to certain spiritual conditions and states, queries and responses, ecstatic utterances, and moral–ethical advice. On many occasions, one also comes across fragments of letters and pieces of correspondence as well as anecdotes that are attributed to various early Sufi authorities with different prevailing themes. One example is a common reference to a self-punishment undertaken by a Sufi who happened to neglect one of the strict prescriptions of devotion (for instance, Bishr ibn al-Hārith who was frequently narrated to have punished himself by avoiding certain sorts of food that he particularly craved: al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī 2002, vol. 7, p. 556). Among the well-known rhetorical themes are the common threefold taxonomies of knowledge (Ebstein 2020, pp. 33–64) and the tendency to define the high point of a mystical state by asserting the mystic's loss of awareness of that state itself. In this state, the mystic is entirely absorbed by God's revelations and feels absent from the human world. Two examples of this are as follows: Abū Ya'qūb al-Sūsī who said “Love is imperfect until the lover abandons the vision of his love for the one whom he loves by annihilating the very awareness of his love” (al-Qushayrī 2017, p. 657; Knysh 2007, p. 331) and Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. c. 245/860) who defines *dhikr* (remembrance) as “the absence of the one who remembers from his act of remembrance” (al-Qushayrī 2017, p. 503; Knysh 2007, p. 235).

The corpus of Sufi anecdotes reveals different contents, sources, and ways of the transmission of Sufi sayings from one generation to another. An interesting example relates to the custom of the illicit gaze (*naẓar*) in the Sufi ethical system. According to one version, one Syrian Sufi became implicated in what seemed like an erotic gaze at a Christian boy. Abū 'Abdallāh Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā ibn al-Jallā' (d. 306/918–919), the Sufi master of Syria, was reported to have denounced *naẓar* and warned that any Sufi guilty of this behavior would eventually be punished (Ibn 'Asākir 1995, vol. 6, pp. 81–93. For a detailed reference to the sources of Ibn al-Jallā's life and teachings, see Ephrat (2008), pp. 64–65, footnote 69). The same story appears later in the work of al-Hujwīrī al-Jullābī (d. ca. 465/1072); however, in this version, the Sufi caught gazing at a Christian boy was Ibn al-Jallā' himself, while the person who rebuked him was al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 298/910) (Hujwīrī Jullābī 1926, pp. 169–170). In other versions of the same story, al-Junayd was replaced by Abū 'Abdallāh

al-Balkhī (d. 319/931) (Ibn ‘Asākir 1995, vol. 6, p. 84; Ibn al-Jawzī 1962, p. 127. See the biography of al-Balkhī in al-Sulamī 1960, pp. 206–11; Jāmī 1918, pp. 116–17). The idea of punishment for an illicit or forbidden gaze was well known in the Arabic love literature that had existed prior to the composition of the famous Sufi textbooks (Ibn al-Jawzī 1962, pp. 126–30). The story’s reference to Ibn al-Jallā’ is, therefore, doubtful, and this doubt can be applied to many similar stories that can be described as fiction. Such stories are, however, significant because they give us a sense of the Sufi ethical system and the ways this system was manipulated and transmitted at various stages of Sufism’s development. The inclusion of famous figures in such stories hints at possible shifts in the Sufi conception of misdeeds and inappropriate behavior. The very act of selecting certain figures as examples (e.g., either sinner or guide) indicates the specific agenda of an author. The same narrative plot may appear repeatedly in similar anecdotes about different figures who, after death, were seen by others in their dreams, asked about their destiny, and answered that God had granted them glory and forgiveness. Interestingly, this anecdotal framework was widely used in the early non-Sufi biographical literature (Ibn al-Jazrī 1986, p. 60; al-Nuwayrī 2002, vol. 31, p. 421). In Sufi works, this plot is frequently used in apologetic contexts where a controversial figure is positively described by the author. Thus, Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn (d. 304/916–917), the early mystic of Rayy, whose controversial statements are preserved in Sufi and non-Sufi biographies, is quoted by Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) as saying the following: “Imitate every act you see me doing except for two things: Do not incur debts in your relationship with God, and do not keep company with youths” (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914, p. 264; Salamah-Qudsi 2019, pp. 250–57). At the end of Ibn al-Ḥusayn’s biography in *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa*, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) mentions someone who says that he saw Ibn al-Ḥusayn after his death in his dream and asked him “what did God do to you?” so that Ibn al-Ḥusayn’s immediate answer was: “God forgave me and bestowed His mercy upon me” (Ibn al-Jawzī 2000, vol. 2, p. 301). Likewise, al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) speaks of one of the leaders of the Qalandariyya group in Hamadhān (a group of itinerant antinomian dervishes), Mas‘ūd ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Dallāl (d. 567/1172), who, having been seen after his death in a dream, was asked the same question and answered in a similar manner. This is also an apologetic context where al-Dhahabī felt that the identification of this character with the Qalandariyya needs to be followed by the dream’s anecdote (al-Dhahabī 2003, vol. 12, p. 128).

This said, it would be crucial to raise questions as to the provenance of narratives that were incorporated into the Sufi literature: Who was responsible for the creation of such prototypical materials? What were their sources? In what ways did this kind of material reflect reality and how did it relate to the broader fabric of Islamic tradition, mores, and ethics?

Notably, a great number of Sufi sayings and anecdotes replicate those found in the non-Sufi literature, such as general works of belles-lettres (*adab*), biographies, stories of profane love, and historical chronicles. When a particular statement or verse is mentioned by a Sufi author, the original usage and connotations are reshaped in line with Sufi ideas and values. To this end, Sufi authors employed several methods. One of them is to simply replace the names of authors of sayings (lovers, poets, litterateurs, and scholars) with those of famous Sufis. Another method consisted in the anonymization of a narrative, which at times may have been unintentional. It is very possible that Sufi authors simply did not know or were not interested in knowing the identity of the author; what was important was the transmission of the theme or morals of a saying and not its author. One example is the following love story quoted by al-Qushayrī in his Chapter on Divine Love (Bāb al-Maḥabba):

Al-Sarī gave me a piece of paper, saying: “This is better for you than seven hundred [pious!] stories or the choicest [prophetic!] reports”. It read: “When I said that I loved her, she told me: ‘You have lied to me! Don’t I see that the members [of your body!] are still covered [with flesh!]?’”. (al-Qushayrī 2017, p. 657; Knysh 2007, p. 331)

Al-Sarī al-Saqāṭī (d. 772/867) was al-Junayd's maternal uncle and teacher. He left no extant writings, and his thought is known only through his sayings quoted in Sufi textbooks. In al-Qushayrī's text, the reference included three verses, but the most quoted version involving al-Junayd and his uncle, al-Sarī al-Saqāṭī, is the one cited by later authors such as Ibn al-ʿImād al-Ḥanbalī (d. 1089/1679) and Ibn al-Mulaqqin (d. 804/1402) (Ibn al-Mulaqqin 1994, p. 163; Ibn al-ʿImād al-Ḥanbalī 1986, vol. 3, p. 241). Almost the same lines were quoted by Ibn Dāwūd al-Zāhirī (d. 297/909), the author of an early work on profane love *Kitāb al-Zahra*. Here, they were attributed to a woman named Umm Ḥamāda al-Hamadhāniyya who was a relatively unknown female poet of early Islam. Ibn Dāwūd al-Zāhirī refers to her and quotes her poetry (Ibn Dāwūd al-Zāhirī 1985, pp. 51; 92). Thus, we have two references to the same poetic statement made on two different occasions; the first is in the context of profane love and its conditions, while the other is in a Sufi context that depicts the paradigmatic Sufi masters al-Junayd and al-Sarī al-Saqāṭī. These two contexts often intermingle, and the reference to these two Sufi figures exemplifies profane love rather than a Sufi concept. Finally, we find al-Sarrāj al-Qārī' (d. 500/1106), the author of the famous work on profane love theory *Maṣārīʿ al-ʿushshāq*, mentioning the same three verses (al-Sarrāj al-Qārī' n.d., vol. 1, p. 110). It looks like the adaptation of the earliest version of the poem in the Sufi literature was undertaken prior to al-Qushayrī. Many later non-Sufi biographers used this story in their writings. One of these was Ibn Kathīr (Ibn Kathīr 2003, vol. 14, pp. 499–500, in the biography of al-Sarī. The strophe that appears here includes only two verses). The process was diachronic and mutually enriching; Sufis used the anecdote to convey their own concepts, whereas non-Sufis used its Sufi framework to convey their profane ideas.

Another example is the famous statement, commonly attributed to Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, concerning the mystical meaning of *sirr*, a significant term in the early Sufi discourse that literally indicates “secret” but technically refers to one of the subtle entities that serve as the site of the mystic's contact with God. According to Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, “The breasts of noble men are the graveyards of innermost secrets” (Knysh 2007, p. 110). This widely known proverb, used to praise noble men's ability to keep secrets, was mentioned by Abū Bakr al-Khawārazmī (d. 383/993) and al-Thaʿālibī (d. 429/1038) in their treatises on Arabic proverbs (al-Khawārazmī 2003, p. 120; al-Thaʿālibī 1981, p. 317; al-Kawrānī 2008, vol. 10, p. 48). The early Sufi author and moralist Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) attributed this statement to “one of the wise men” in his discussion of the ability to keep secrets as a crucial means to cultivate brotherly relationships among Sufis (al-Sulamī 1990, p. 70). In Sufi biographical contexts, the statement loses its general proverbial connotations to become a way of establishing the authority of the Egyptian Sufi Dhū al-Nūn by showcasing his perspective of this important Sufi term (Abū Nuʿaym 1974, vol. 9, p. 377). In other Sufi writings, this statement is cited anonymously.

Sufi authors were also eager to appropriate, for their own use, sayings of proverbial lovers, famous poets, scholars, men of letters, pre-Islamic prophets, and the Prophet Muḥammad and his close companions. Some entries were anonymous. Christopher Melchert's survey of the body of sayings in the largest and most influential Sufi collections of al-Sarrāj, Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038), and al-Khargūshī (d. 407/1016?) is very informative in this regard. According to Melchert, Abū Nuʿaym's work is the largest collection of sayings with about 15,000 items; al-Sarrāj's work has 1500 items, al-Sulamī's *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* includes about 1750, and al-Khargūshī's work includes about 3700 items. The survey relates to the numbers and sources of the quotations in each of the three collections. Sources could be the Qurʾān, quotations of pre-Islamic prophets, reports of the Prophet Muḥammad, his companions and, later on, their followers (*tābiʿūn*), and followers of followers chronologically up to the mid-fourth/tenth century. The works of both al-Sarrāj and al-Khargūshī include quotations of unidentified or anonymous people (about 10 percent of the total body of quotations) (Melchert 2010, pp. 32–33). In order to characterize some of al-Khargūshī's approaches, it would be useful, as Melchert himself does throughout his work, to follow the contents and implications of the set of quotations

he selects and the persons behind them. Al-Khargūshī, for example, frequently refers to al-Shāfi‘ī and his positive depiction in *Tahdhīb al-asrār* which confirms the reports that describe al-Khargūshī as a Shāfi‘ī scholar (Melchert 2010, pp. 33–34).

Qur’ānic quotations were not used in Sufi textbooks only to endow Sufi discourses with Islamic legitimacy; they also served as platforms for expressing personal opinions and responses to particular situations. On many occasions, narrators cite a particular verse or part of a verse instead of making their own comments. It was reported, for instance, that one day, al-Junayd attended a *samā‘* session. While a group of Sufis was experiencing intense ecstatic states of intoxication, he himself remained tranquil and dumbfounded. When asked: “Why do we not see you moving?”, he answered the following: “Thou seest the mountains and thinkest them firmly fixed, but they shall pass away as the clouds pass away” (Abū Nu‘aym 1974, vol. 10, p. 271). Al-Junayd’s answer is a simple quotation of the first part of Q. 27:88. From early sources, we know that al-Junayd used to praise the state of sobriety and tranquility even under the influence of spiritual excitement motivated by *samā‘* or any other external trigger. He did not, however, express his own opinion, preferring instead to quote the Qur’ān. In al-Junayd’s personal interpretation, the mountains mentioned in the verse serve as a metaphor for the Sufi who has reached the highest state of spiritual stability (*tamkīn*) and who is protected by God from “sliding” into intoxication and loss of consciousness. In making this statement, al-Junayd affirms the essential role of *samā‘* in the Sufi mode of life. As long as *samā‘* does not cause one’s loss of consciousness and self-control, it is, according to al-Junayd, perfectly legitimate. The metaphoric implications in this verse seem to be more powerful than any other comment al-Junayd could have stated. This conclusion holds true even if the entire anecdote was fabricated by later transmitters in order to legitimize *samā‘* in response to the increasing hostility toward Sufi rituals and customs on the part of Sufism’s detractors.

Contradictions are very common in Sufi sayings. One sees this in Sufi writings concerning the nature of the relationship between a Sufi and one’s society. On one hand, we find the celebration of solitude and abandonment of association with people. On the other hand, there are Sufis who praise the virtue of being in people’s company and guiding ordinary folks on the path to God. In the same chapter on retreat (*khalwa*) and seclusion (*uzla*), al-Qushayrī attributes the following statement to al-Junayd: “Whoever wants his religion to be sound and his body and heart to be relieved should isolate himself from people. This is a desolate time and wise is he who chooses seclusion”. Immediately after this statement, al-Qushayrī quotes another one attributed to Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sūsī, according to which “only the strong are capable of withdrawing themselves from people” and that for the majority of Sufis, “living in a community is more beneficial, because some imitate others [in good works!]” (al-Qushayrī 2017, p. 317; Knysh 2007, p. 124). Al-Qushayrī carefully examines the virtues of companionship (*ṣuḥba*) in a special chapter at the end of his Epistle. Contradiction and ambivalence are therefore hallmarks in Sufi discussions of their language and worldview. Contradictory opinions are also found side by side in chapters dedicated to the human condition, like marriage and earning one’s livelihood (*kasb*), as well as in chapters dedicated to Sufi rituals, such as *samā‘* sessions, and doctrinal issues such as ecstasy (*wajd*) and self-annihilation in God (*fanā‘*).

Sufi sayings and witticisms are a vital source for teaching and preserving Sufi dogmas and training disciples. These sayings became major building blocks in the increasingly institutionalized Sufi discipleship. They can be divided into two types: *shaṭaḥāt* and non-*shaṭaḥāt*. At the basis of Sufi ecstatic statements lay two foundational questions: Is it possible to express the high states of grace (*aḥwāl*) bestowed upon the mystic by God? If the answer is yes, then how could this be practically conducted and in what language frames and patterns? The following section will attempt to answer these questions by examining the history of early Sufi attempts to express the Sufi states of grace though the majority of them confess that silence is the best ideal to which one should always look forward.

3. Expressing the States of Grace (*aḥwāl*) in Early Sufism

Despite the emphasis on the virtue of silence in early Sufism, speaking and writing played a fundamental role in Sufi theoretical system and practices. Speaking, however, was perceived as unnecessary or even dangerous, and silence was preferable. “Being silent is part of good manners in the presence of God” (*al-ṣamt min ādāb al-ḥaḍra*), asserts the renowned Sufi author and master Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) (al-Qushayrī 2017, p. 341; Knysh 2007, p. 331). The ideal Sufi is one who keeps silent because he has no need to share his intense individual state with anyone other than God (al-Khargūshī 1999, pp. 451–57).

The second half of the third/ninth century witnessed the rise of a particular Sufi piety whose main representatives lived or acted in Baghdad. This Iraqi-oriented Sufi piety had increasingly developed around the teachings of the influential and charismatic character of Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (Karamustafa 2007, pp. 1–37). During that early historical stage, guiding masters began to play a foundational role in institutionalizing Sufism and turning it into a full-fledged framework of piety with a well-defined system of beliefs, codes of behavior, and rules of initiation. As the guiding role of Sufi sheikhs became one of the major tenets of Sufism by the end of the third/ninth century, speech became an inseparable part of this guidance. Other forms of non-speech expression such as body language, actions, and silent speech were also included in this preference for silence; these were considered to be wise and expressive conduct undertaken by early Sufi masters to transmit Sufi knowledge to their aspirants. An example of this centers around al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) who was very hungry when he visited al-Junayd. Al-Junayd offered al-Muḥāsibī something to eat that was from a wedding ceremony of one of his relatives. Al-Muḥāsibī instinctively understood the provenance of the food and immediately regurgitated his first piece (al-Qushayrī 2017, p. 120; al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914, pp. 331–32). A few days later, al-Junayd asked al-Muḥāsibī about his behavior, and al-Muḥāsibī told him that he was unable to eat food whose source was suspect. Avoiding food obtained through illegal methods was part of the code of behavior that was frequently ascribed to early Sufi masters as a devotional–didactical instrument.

Influential masters educated aspirants not only through their own statements but also through their personal example, non-verbal conduct, and gestures. The Sufi master receives divine revelations by listening to God (*samāʿ* ‘an *Allāh*) and conveys these revelations to the sincerest among his aspirants. It should be noted that hearing precedes vision in the spiritual process of truly understanding divine realities and that reaching the final destination of the Sufi path goes far beyond the state of observation; it involves the act of pure listening to the divine Beloved with no barriers or mediators. One of the major rituals that marked the formal affiliation of the aspirant to *ṭarīqa*-based Sufism from the late sixth/twelfth century onward was the acquisition of the master’s formula of recollecting God’s name (*talqīn al-dhikr*). At a metaphoric level, this custom symbolizes the “spiritual fertilization of the aspirant’s essence” (*talqīn bāṭin al-murīd*) (al-Suhrawardī 1967, pp. 73–76; Salamah-Qudsi 2009, p. 415). It also demonstrates the importance of listening in the formation of Sufi practices and in the process of attaining and transmitting mystical knowledge (Meier 1999, pp. 23–48).

Seeing also plays an important role in the dynamic relationship between master and disciple, and it is significant from both the perspective of disciple and master. The disciple observes every action of the master down to the smallest detail in order to progress along the Sufi path, while the master’s gaze has a powerful impact on the disciple; it, therefore, is an effective instrument in the hands of the master. This process is likened to the actions of a tortoise that educates her offspring through the sole power of her gaze. The tortoise’s metaphor was attributed to Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (d. 656/1258), the eponym of the Shādhiliyya by ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Shaʿrānī in the tenth/sixteenth century (al-Shaʿrānī 1999, pp. 255; Ibn ‘Aṭā 1926, p. 15). According to al-Shaʿrānī, one effective glance of a sheikh might be enough to uplift his disciple, and moreover, it might lead him to make progress without self-discipline (*mujaḥhada*) (al-Shaʿrānī 1999, vol. 1, p. 99).

Early Sufi works emphasize the futility of discussing mystical ideas since these are the fruits of intuition and non-scholastic insights in which there is no need for the human speculative intellect. The wide recognition of this futility did not prevent Sufis from putting their mystical ideas in writing. To this end, Sufi masters used both explicit language (*ibāra*) and subtle allusion (*ishāra*). The word *ishāra*, which has different meanings in the Sufi literature, is defined in Arabic lexicography as “a gesture of the hands, eyes, eyebrows, lips or mouth with the intention of conveying something that could not otherwise be expressed verbally” (Ibn Manzūr 1994, vol. 4, p. 437; Cf. Akkash 2005, p. 27). Notwithstanding the often-cited futility of language in expressing subtle mystical ideas, Sufi authors wrote profusely about their mystical states. While al-Qushayrī refers to the futility of language in describing divine love (“love cannot be described or defined by any clear and understandable description or definition”), he provides a detailed discussion of the topic, citing many Sufi sayings and anecdotes (al-Qushayrī 2017, p. 651; Knysh 2007, p. 327). Prior to al-Qushayrī, Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī (d. ca. 261/875) in his account of his visionary ascension (*miʿrāj*) and al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. ca. 300/912) in his autobiographical *Budurwā shaʿn*, insisted that the mystical experience was indescribable, and yet they sought to describe it, albeit in each one’s own particular way (al-Qushayrī 1964, pp. 129–33; al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 1965, pp. 355).

In spite of the professed futility of language and ineffability of mystical knowledge, speech, as evidenced by the impressive number of Sufi writings, remained prominent and widely used in Sufi tradition. The Sufi experience is widely seen as paradoxical. While it frees the mystic from conventional ways of thinking and feeling, speech and silence, hell and paradise, closeness and distance, and absence and presence are no longer conceived as opposites (Ahmed 2015, pp. 390–430). The description of *dhikr* (one’s recollecting God’s name) as the full presence of God or of the aspirant’s presence in God appears side by side with a further description as the full absence or abstinence of the aspirant from all worldly commitments and responsibilities including *dhikr* itself. Sufi sayings are generally terse and are structured in such a way as to act as powerful triggers for ecstatic states and overflowing emotions (*shatḥ*). Going well beyond their original semantics, they convey a multiplicity of often contradictory meanings. These sayings are the smallest units of Sufi prose-based writing tradition. They abound in Sufi hagiographies, the *manāqib* literature (literature in praise of saintly figures), Sufi manuals, and anecdotal texts that go far beyond mere didactic advice; their intent is to emotionally affect readers or listeners or to undermine preconceived meanings, causing a loss of trust in the language itself. In one passage of his *Kitāb al-Mawāqif* from the mid-fourth/tenth century, Muḥammad al-Niffarī (d. ca. 354/965), a mysterious early mystic from Iraq, writes the following:

Listen to no letter concerning Me, and receive no information of Me from any letter. Letters cannot inform of themselves, how then should they tell of Me? I am He that made the letter, and informs of it. (al-Niffarī 1935, p. 70)

This passage is one of many in al-Niffarī’s work which celebrates one’s loss of confidence in language in order to achieve the highest spiritual state of *waqfa* where God is the only actor. The word *waqfa* means a stopping place or the act of stopping itself. In al-Niffarī’s writings, it carries the meaning of a mystical state in which the Sufi, who advances through various stages in the route of ascent, pauses between two stages in order to obtain divine commands and provisions that relate to the higher degree to which God transfers to him/her. The state of *waqfa*, then, requires a total detachment from what al-Niffarī calls *siwā*, everyone and everything other than God, and a complete absence of the mystic’s will amidst the state of annihilation unto God’s will. Influenced by al-Niffarī, Ibn ʿArabī draws on *waqfa* in his monumental *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Ibn ʿArabī 1876, vol. 2, p. 805; Salamah-Qudsi 2019, pp. 168–70).

Al-Niffarī has numerous shocking statements. For instance, he states that the Qurʾān in itself has nothing to do with the elevated state of *waqfa* and that God said the following to him: “Neither write, study, nor reckon or examine” (al-Niffarī 1996, p. 60; Niffarī 1945, p. 70). Speaking and writing are unable to lead the human being to God; both fail to bring

one to witness the divine beauty. They are, in fact, nothing but manifestations of *siwā*. The elevated mystical states were initially identified in the Sufi sources as direct, intensive, and individual. However, this individualism was gradually marginalized in the course of the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries and replaced by Sufi institutionalism and its agents, the authors of Sufi textbooks. In these textbooks, the validities of speaking and writing were depicted as essential instruments for communicating with and being part of broader Islamic society.

The fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries witnessed a massive process of composing Sufi treatises and textbooks. This process, however, had started earlier, with al-Junayd's letters, which had been collected later by Ibn 'Arabī's disciple, Ibn Sawdakīn (d. 646/1248). Fully known as Abū Ṭāhir Ismā'īl ibn Sawdakīn ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Nūrī al-Ḥanafī, he was born in Egypt, then moved to Aleppo (Ḥalab), where he died and was buried. Ibn Sawdakīn is largely known as the copyist of the famous MS of Şehit Ali Paşa (No. 1374) that includes *Rasā'il al-Junayd* (Ibn al-ʿAdīm n.d., vol. 4, pp. 645–48). Interestingly, it was Ibn 'Arabī's circle of disciples who were also responsible for collecting the writings of al-Niffārī in the late seventh/thirteenth century (Hirtenstein 2017, pp. 127–42).

The processes of compiling large textbooks and gathering earlier Sufi narratives are proof that communal-based elements in early Sufi piety became increasingly dominant. This communal aspect of Sufism is not only documented in Sufi biographies, collective rituals, and personal relationships but also in the prevailing themes of anecdotes and stories attributed to them by later authors and transmitters. This narrative material came to be integrated into broad theoretical discussions of certain terms or mystical states in later textbooks. One interesting example for this is the concept of God's oneness (*tawḥīd*) which was given a colorful narrative framework in the discussion of its cosmological implications by al-Junaydī. According to al-Junayd, *tawḥīd* is not only the act of confessing God as the One Creator, but it is also a shared spiritual experience of proximity by chosen human beings who reconnect with the primordial state of proximity on the Day of the Covenant (*yawm al-mīthāq*) (Abdel-Kader 1962, pp. 68–80).

In the following sections, I will identify how sayings were used in the early Sufi literature and how their unique use reveals interactions with or reflection of certain realities.

4. Sufi Sayings and Speech Act Theory

In order to understand the ways masters' sayings acted as the main building blocks in the early Sufi training system, I propose to benefit from theories on language philosophy and particularly speech act theory whose primary founders are John L. Austin (d. 1960) and John Searle (born 1932). This theory relies on the assumption that the minimal unit of human communication is not a sentence but the performance of certain kinds of acts, such as asking questions, giving orders, describing, explaining, and apologizing. Austin calls these types of acts "illocutionary acts" (Dror 2021, p. 2). A major component of this theory is the speaker/writer's intentionality which was very seminal in Searle's articulations of the theory and whose original version was firmed up by Austin. According to Austin (1976), there are three kinds of speech acts: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. The locutionary refers to the act of uttering particular words. The illocutionary act refers to the pragmatic target of uttering those words such as asking questions, ordering, advising, announcing, etc. The perlocutionary act refers to the effect of the uttered statement on the audience and involves acts such as convincing, pleasing, inciting, etc. All these levels refer to what the speaker does while uttering a sentence. If the speaker aims to create an effect on the audience, he/she is described as performing a perlocutionary act.

Thomas Reid differentiates between "social acts/operations" (promising, warning, forgiving) and "solitary acts" (judging, intending, deliberating, and desiring). The latter are characterized by the fact that their performance does not presuppose any "intelligent being in the universe" apart from the person who performs them. A social act, in contrast, must be directed to some other person, and for this reason, it constitutes a miniature "civil society", a special kind of structured whole, embracing both the one who initiates

it and the one to whom it is directed (Smith 2003, p. 5). Based on this classification, we can classify the emotional, ecstatic utterances of some early Sufi figures as solitary acts which were not intended to communicate with the community. As I will show in the following discussion, most Sufi ecstatic utterances, however, reflected a Sufi aspiration to communicate with the Sufi community, to affect one's counterparts, and to push them to doubt the role of the intellect in reaching spiritual realities. Using Searle's classification, many of the ecstatic utterances, like some autobiographical statements in Sufi sources, are expressive illocutionary acts.

Sufi sayings that refer to general themes, practices, and ethics of the Sufi community have a clear social act, using Reid's dual classification. According to Searle, a large number of these sayings are in fact direct illocutionary acts that seek to train aspirants and try to get them to conduct particular things (acts and codes of conduct). While referring to Sufi sayings, it is still important to pay special attention to perlocutionary acts whose status has been problematic since Austin introduced the concept. Those acts that carry a predictable perlocutionary effect are not always conventional. When you would like to insult someone, for instance, you do not use the sentence "I insult you" but, rather, a great variety of forms and rhetorical structures by which you do insult that person while uttering a statement (Kurzon 1998, pp. 572, 582). Daniel Kurzon argues that the actual effect on the hearer/reader is not a condition in considering a particular sentence of incitement or persuasion a perlocutionary act. What matters here is the speaker's intention to create that desired effect. In the Sufi sphere, many sayings played a fundamental role in challenging religious norms and paradigms, urging hearers to embark on a different kind of spiritual experience. The survival of these sayings across centuries and their impact on the establishment of a powerful Sufi identity leave no doubt that many of them were not only illocutionary but also perlocutionary. An ecstatic utterance like "I saw my Lord through the eye of my heart" (*ra'aytu Rabbī bi-'ayn qalbī*) by al-Ḥallāj can be seen as expressive act; yet, it also has a perlocutionary act in the way it encourages the hearers to perform all that is needed to see these inner visions of God.

5. Three Categories of Sufi Sayings That Mirror Three Historical Phases

Despite the methodological difficulty to verify their authenticity, Sufi sayings mirror the development of early Sufi piety. A huge number of sayings with a great spectrum of themes, forms, and structures come to the fore when we speak about the Sufi literature, and therefore, I do not pretend to suggest any paradigmatic divisions of this broad corpus. What I am trying to conduct here is to identify general directions in the production, transmission, and use of the medium of sayings in the early Sufi literature. These directions can reveal the unique ways in which Sufis used sayings to both interact and correspond with certain realities. Both ways of interacting and corresponding are mirrored in different functional categories of sayings that can be analyzed, thereby enabling us to see the dynamic feature of this medium in the process of establishing the Sufi tradition and the authority of its heroes, the Sufi masters. The period between the third/ninth and the seventh/thirteenth centuries witnessed the rise of different forms of sayings embedded in different writing structures and styles. In his *Early Islamic Mysticism* (1996), Michael Sells proposes a fourfold classification of the phases of the development of Islamic spirituality. The first is what he calls the "pre-Sufi phase". The second is the "early period of Sufism" that extends from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) to al-Niffarī in the mid-fourth/tenth century. The third is the "formative phase" that "shows Sufism as a self-conscious mode of spirituality embracing all aspects of life and society." This phase, according to Sells, extends from al-Sarrāj to al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1074). The fourth phase is what Sells calls "the Sufi synthetic works of the seventh century of Islam by Ḍaḥḥār, Rūmī and Ibn 'Arabī." (Sells 1996, pp. 17–18). This classification is based on the exploration of major trends and characteristics of the Sufi literature which corresponded with the developments in Sufi theories, Sufis' self-consciousness, and ways of interaction with broader realities. The classification presented in the current paper, however, relies on another perspective; it is based on the prevailing building blocks across Sufi forms of

writings and masters' sayings. This is why the classification presented here primarily relies on thematic and rhetorical trends in the bulk of sayings as well as the different forms of interaction between these sayings and the intellectual contexts in which they were written down and presented in Sufi textbooks and treatises after generations of oral transmission.

The following proposed threefold classification of sayings in this time span does not mean that there were no overlapping features and directions in each historical stage. Such crossovers keep the Sufi writing tradition individual, creative, and sometimes even shocking and overwhelming.

These are three proposed functional categories of sayings corresponding with the three developmental phases of early Sufi piety until the seventh/thirteenth century:

1. The first is the category of sayings that refer to the rise of Sufism during the late second/eighth and early third/ninth centuries. Sayings of this category serve as major building blocks of an intimate or even introverted form of Sufi writings that, unlike later Sufi textbooks and manuals, were addressed to a very specific group of followers. Sayings of the first category illustrate two major qualities: ambiguity in relating mystical experiences and self-defense where there have been extensive attempts to bridge the gaps between Islamic law and Sufi doctrines. The latter was an outcome of the early conflict between Sufism and its opponents. Notably, this category primarily comes in the form of the author's own sayings rather than in a form of quotations from others. The clearest example of this category is the writings of Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz (d. 286/899 or a few years earlier), a contemporary of al-Junayd and an introverted Sufi master who committed himself to a very rigid life of roving and austerities. In his *Letters (Rasā'il)*, al-Kharrāz includes many sayings of his own to describe very enigmatically the spiritual virtues of the chosen ones and their hierarchies in the path towards God. On one occasion, he says "*ahlu tajrīd bāna 'alayhim al-kawn wa-ḥāla 'alayhim al-ḥawl*" (al-Kharrāz 1967, p. 184). The translation of such a statement is challenging. One possible translation could be as follows: "those are the people of abstraction. The universe disappears from them, and their power drains from them." On another occasion, al-Kharrāz defines the ambiguity of the concept of *rūḥ* in a very ambiguous language: "*baqā' al-rūḥ fī thalāthati ashya' wa-hiya: baqā' uhu fī al-'ilm al-sābiq wa-baqā' uhu fī al-'ilm al-azal wa-baqā' uhu fī al-'ilm al-abad*" (al-Kharrāz 1967, p. 194). The translation is not correct unless one identifies the differences between the three words conveying "eternal", "primordial", or "infinite", which are challenging by themselves. "The subsistence of *rūḥ* is in three matters: in the primordial science, in the science of infinity, and in the science of eternity". This writing style correlates with al-Junayd's writing style in his *Letters* where he barely quotes from others while collecting his own notions on sophisticated themes. Throughout his *Letters*, al-Junayd attempts to put his cosmological doctrines into enigmatic formulations which are fraught with the ambiguous use of pronouns and metaphors. One example reads as follows: "*afnānī bi-inshā'ī ka-mā anshānī badyan fī ḥālī fanā'ī*" (He destroyed me by creating me in the same way He created me at first when I was in a state of *fanā'*) (al-Junayd al-Baghdādī 1962, Arabic, p. 32. The English translation is mine). By using paradoxes and ambiguous structures, al-Junayd establishes his elitist theoretical discourse. From another perspective, he is also eager to show how this theoretical discourse exists contemporaneously with Sufi adherence to Muslim law and uncompromising commitment to God's rights (al-Junayd al-Baghdādī 1962, pp. 29, 47).
2. The second category is that of sayings whose focus is on Sufi lexicon, ecstatic states and expressions, and distinctive Sufi rituals. This category is widespread in Sufi textbooks of the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries and genuinely mirrors the stage of consolidating the collective Sufi identity covering different types of sayings: Sufi commentary on the Qur'ān, sayings on the virtues of the group of Sufi brothers, and didactic sayings whose focus is on the manners of behavior to which members of the Sufi community need to adhere. As previously mentioned, sayings of this category

are not restricted to this historical stage; however, they are found in great numbers in the textbooks of this stage: Al-Sarrāj's detailed chapter on the Sufi lexicon (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914, pp. 333–74); al-Qushayrī's chapters on Sufi jargon (al-Qushayrī 2017, pp. 231–94); al-Qushayrī's long chapters on the different ranks of the Sufi route of ascent (al-Qushayrī 2017, pp. 295–670); and many others. These all are remarkable in their contribution to the establishment of a collective Sufi identity.

3. The third category covers sayings that appeared and were extensively transmitted from the sixth/twelfth century onwards. These are sayings that pay less attention to ecstatic states, expressions, and Sufi jargon in general. Instead, they primarily celebrate the communal–institutional aspects of Sufi activities including Sufi rituals, the hierarchies of initiation to the Sufi path, and the polar opposite opinions that existed between masters. Two sample works are mentioned here: *ʿAwārif al-maʿārif* (Beneficences of Knowledge(s)), the *magnum opus* of Abū Ḥafṣ ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234), the influential master of Baghdad, and *Kitāb al-Ḥikam* (The Book of Aphorisms), the most widely known work of the seventh/thirteenth century Sufi master, Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1310). This was a time when many Sufi fraternities flourished. Al-Suhrawardī was the eponym of the Suhrawardiyya that flourished after his death, while Ibn ʿAṭāʾ was the son of a student of the Sheikh Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, the founder of the Shadhiliyya *ṭarīqa*. Both works had a great impact on Sufi followers in different territories and periods of the Islamic world. The focus of al-Suhrawardī's work is on life within the boundaries of Sufi communities, their ethical system, functions, and relationships. This is why he gathers a large number of sayings from throughout the centuries that focus on ethics and relationships with masters and fellows. The chapter on Sufi jargon appears only at the end of al-Suhrawardī's work. As for Ibn ʿAṭāʾ's work, it is a collection of 262 incisive aphorisms written in a form of terse maxims in Arabic prose which is often rhymed and designed to instruct the wayfarer through the path of knowledge and purification. The impact of this work was immense, and many commentaries on it were published throughout the centuries. The following quotation illustrates how he could connect emotional themes and gracious language and have it successfully reach all kinds of people regardless their level of education: *“lā tarḥal min kawṇ ilā kawṇ fa-takūn ka-ḥimār al-raḥā yasīr, wa-lladhī irtaḥala ilayhi huwa alladhī irtaḥala ʿanhu, wa-lākin irḥal min al-akwān ilā al-mukawwīn”* (“Travel not from creature to creature, otherwise you will be like a donkey at the mill: roundabout he turns, his goal the same as his departure. Rather, go from creatures to the Creator”) (Ibn ʿAṭāʾ 1969, pp. 132–33; for the English translation, Ibn ʿAṭāʾ 1984, p. 31). On another occasion, Ibn ʿAṭāʾ writes the following: “It is better for you to keep company with an ignorant man dissatisfied with himself than to keep company with a learned man satisfied with himself. For what knowledge is there in a self-satisfied scholar? And what ignorance is there in an unlearned man dissatisfied with himself?” (Ibn ʿAṭāʾ 1984, pp. 29–30). In this statement, Ibn ʿAṭāʾ uses contrariness to severely criticize hypocritical religious scholars whose ostentation contradicts the sincerity and modesty expected from them.

While al-Suhrawardī chose plain didactic prose to outline the borders of Sufi life and activities, Ibn ʿAṭāʾ chose either charming and pithy aphorisms to effectively and influentially relay his didactic messages or occasional criticism of certain phenomena and groups.

Ecstatic expressions (*shataḥāt*) are key to illustrate the dialectical relationship between silence and speech in the mystical domain, the ontological dilemma of mystical language, and the attempt by mainstream Sufism to reason and identify the ways intoxicated voices expressed intense experiences. The rise of *shataḥāt* as a major category of Sufi sayings should be seen and studied as one of the hallmarks in the development of Sufi self-consciousness and identity and, therefore, deserves further discussion.

6. Ecstatic Expressions (*shaṭaḥāt*)

Shaṭaḥāt are expressions that are both ecstatic and “outrageous in character” (Ernst 2007). They are commonly attributed to al-Ḥallāj, Abū Bakr al-Shiblī, Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī, Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d. ca. 320/932), and Rūzbihān al-Baqlī (d. 606/1209). Al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī defines *shaṭaḥāt* as “strange expression(s) describing an ecstasy that overflows [someone!] because of its power” (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914, p. 375). The term was not common in ancient Arabic. Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1205/1790), the famous lexicologist and author of the dictionary *Tāj al-ʿarūs*, indicates that the word is not included in any of the early Arabic lexicons that he has ever consulted (al-Zabīdī 1965–2001, vol. 6, p. 507). It seems most probable that the word in its nominal form, both singular and plural, had not enjoyed wide circulation prior to its appearance in Sufism. At the same time, its verbal and infinitive forms appeared in ancient lexicons to designate movement. Al-Sarrāj was the earliest Sufi author to dedicate a separate chapter to the infinitive form *shaṭḥ* in his *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, the first comprehensive encyclopedia of Sufi doctrine and technical terms. Al-Sarrāj’s discussion of *shaṭḥ* determines how this phenomenon was conceived in later Sufism. There are two basic triggers for *shaṭḥ* according to al-Sarrāj: a powerful ecstasy and the aspirant’s inability to endure “the assault of the luminous spiritual realities that have come upon his heart” (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914, p. 376. For the English translation, see Ernst 1985, p. 12.). Phrases that flow from a Sufi’s speech reveals his deep mystical knowledge although they may sound strange and shocking to outsiders.

Though being introverted and solitary, many *shaṭaḥāt* took the form of assertive speech acts, statements that report mystical experiences that the speaker has embarked upon about which he relates: al-Baṣṭāmī is quoted to have said “My Lord has uplifted me and seated me close to Him” (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914, p. 382). In this example, an assertive illocutionary act helps him illustrate that which appears to him like a real experience and that no one could doubt. On another occasion of al-Baṣṭāmī’s ecstatic utterances, the assertive act intersects with the expressive act according to Searle’s classification: “I turned into a bird whose body is made of God’s oneness” (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914, p. 384). While the speaker reports what he believes to be a real experience aiming at causing hearers/readers to believe him, he also describes and expresses what he felt amidst the state of ecstasy. His statements are perlocutionary because besides these two speech acts, it is highly probable that al-Baṣṭāmī also sought to affect hearers/readers and motivate them to have their own experience of closeness.

Al-Sarrāj’s theory of *shaṭaḥāt* is one of the earliest traces of the conflict between an ecstasy-based spirituality and the necessity for Sufis to adhere to social norms dictated by Islamic beliefs and ethics. This conflict resulted in external criticisms of *taṣawwuf*, as well as internal criticisms addressed by Sufis themselves in the course of the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries. The enemies of *taṣawwuf* made extensive use of *shaṭaḥāt* in order to attack Sufi doctrine and its representatives. Al-Sarrāj integrated a large number of such expressions into his work that otherwise would have remained outside the mainstream or even purposely associated with antinomian religious trends. Al-Sarrāj was not the first to take a lenient approach to the highly problematic expressions of the self-annihilation in God voiced by such mystics as Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī and al-Shiblī. Unlike al-Ḥallāj who was disowned by the representatives of mainstream Sufism in 309/922, these mystics enjoyed the patronage of al-Junayd and his Baghdadi milieu along with al-Sarrāj and other Sufi authors who committed themselves to defending these mystics’ behavior and expressions. At the same time, al-Junayd was critical of the deviant or unbalanced behavior of al-Shiblī and al-Baṣṭāmī, both of whom he would occasionally criticize. While al-Junayd viewed al-Shiblī as a Sufi who “was stopped in his place” (*ūqifa fī makānihi*) (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914, p. 404), he described Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī as the one who “did not manage to leave his initial spiritual state” (*lam yakhruj min ḥāl al-bidāya*) (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914, p. 397). Nonetheless, al-Junayd did not reject them completely because he wanted to establish a solid and unified Baghdadi Sufism, which required him to overcome his personal preferences for the sake of unity. He thereby saved the reputations of al-Baṣṭāmī and al-

Shiblī, at least in later Sufism, by giving moderate explanations to their bold sayings. Due in part to al-Junayd's lenient approach towards al-Shiblī, al-Sarrāj consistently portrays al-Shiblī as a mystic committed to observing conventional Islamic duties and mores (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914, p. 104).

Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī was another early mystic whose ecstatic sayings were defended by representatives of mainstream Sufism. Being one of the first students of the great Baghdadi Sufis, al-Junayd and Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī (d. 295/907–08), al-Wāsiṭī helped establish Baghdadi Sufism in Khurasan (Silvers 2010, p. 1). Al-Sarrāj provides us with his own interpretations of al-Wāsiṭī's problematic sayings (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1947, pp. 12–16).

Al-Junayd and his circle in Baghdad laid the foundation for a collective Sufi ethos based simultaneously on renunciation and experiential knowledge (Karamustafa 2007, p. 19). Within the boundaries of this ethos, Baghdad-based Sufism continued to shape other streams of ascetic–mystical piety outside Iraq. On some occasions, however, this Baghdadi Sufism was threatened by those of its representatives who resorted to shocking expressions, exposing it to attacks by its detractors. In this connection, one should mention the inquisition of the Sufis of Baghdad (*milḥna*) by Ghulām Khalīl (d. 275/888) who was incensed by al-Nūrī's use of the term *‘ishq* (passionate love) with respect to God. Karamustafa indicates that this was not the only reason for Ghulām Khalīl's ire. He was also enraged by the “talk of sexual promiscuity at Sufi meetings, possibly caused by the mixing between genders and association of adult males with male adolescents at these gatherings” (Karamustafa 2007, p. 23. On Ghulām Khalīl and his controversial character scholarship, see Jarrar (2007)). In this and other episodes, ecstatic sayings continued to prompt antagonism and criticism. It was voiced, for example, by Abū Bakr ibn Yazdānyār, the mystic of Urmīya in northwest Persia, who was active in the mid-fourth/tenth century. According to al-Sarrāj, Ibn Yazdānyār had tense disagreements with the Sufis of Baghdad over the explicit ways in which they expressed their spiritual states. “He used to criticize some of the famous Sufis for certain statements and expressions”, as al-Qushayrī briefly states (al-Qushayrī 2017, p. 30). Based on references in early Sufi sources, it appears highly probable that Ibn Yazdānyār, after associating with the Sufis of Baghdad for a particular period of time, could not bear the thought of certain Sufis ignoring good manners and modesty while in the state of mystical intoxication. According to one reference by Khawāja ‘Abdallāh Anṣārī (d. 481/1088), Ibn Yazdānyār describes his contemporary Sufis as displaying “inconceivable states and false signs” (*al-ḥāl al-muḥāl wa-l-ishārāt al-bāṭila*) (Anṣārī Haravī n.d., pp. 123–24. For Ibn Yazdānyār's case in the history of early Sufism, see Salamah-Qudsi 2019, pp. 198–206). While non-Sufi criticisms of the practice of *shatḥ* tradition are attested by many polemical works from the late fifth/eleventh century onwards, such as those of Ibn al-Jawzī (Ibn al-Jawzī 1994, pp. 448–60), it negatively affected the credentials of Sufis, prompting internal criticism reported by early Sufi writers themselves during an earlier historical stage. Some critical references to *shatḥ* were documented in some earlier works of belles-lettres of the fourth/tenth century. On many occasions, authors did not use the term *shatḥ* itself while relating to the Sufis' ecstatic statements. One of these works is *Nishwār al-muḥāḍara* of al-Qāḍī al-Tanūkhī (d. 384/994) who frequently refers to al-Ḥallāj and severely criticizes his ambiguous statements (al-Tanūkhī 1971, vol. 1, p. 169). Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071), the author of the fourth/tenth century historiography *Ta'rikh Baghdād*, uses the verbs *wuswisa* and *yashṭaḥu* in the biography of the Baghdadi Sufi Sumnūn ibn Ḥamza (d. 298/910) to indicate situations in which Sumnūn was no longer capable of bearing his intense spiritual states and began uttering words of ecstasy (al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī 2002, vol. 10, p. 324; Cf. (Salamah-Qudsi 2020) “Sumnūn”, p. 6).

Eventually, *shatḥ* was successfully integrated into mainstream Sufism, although it came to be seen as a sign of spiritual weakness for a Sufi and his inability to endure the intense states of proximity and intoxication. For the mystics themselves, ecstatic utterances are nothing but expressions of their changing states of consciousness caused by divine revelations. They, very often, come in the forms of assertive or expressive speech acts that intend to make hearers/readers know they are expressions of real situations/emotions

which seek to change their religious perspectives. As I will show, some *shatāḥāt* turned out later to be didactic instruments in the context of Sufi training. When al-Ḥallāj's aforementioned statement "I saw my Lord in the eye of my heart" is mentioned in later Sufi discussions of solitude as a condition for intimacy and enlightenment, we might suggest that its new context turned it into a didactic–directive speech act. Using speech act theory to analyze these cases, later authors of Sufi textbooks like al-Sarrāj and al-Qushayrī turn out to be the actors involved in the interpretation of the statement and the forces pushing the speech rather than the original person who uttered the statement.

The criteria for *shatāḥ* and the issue of who determines whether a document, text, or saying can be classified as *shatāḥ* can be best illustrated by two sayings uttered by the mystics of the fourth/tenth century, Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī and Muḥammad al-Niffarī: The first saying, "*man dhakara iftarā, wa-man ṣabara ijtārā, wa-man shakara inbarā*", is attributed by al-Sarrāj to al-Wāsiṭī, although al-Sarrāj also notes that it is sometimes ascribed to other Baghdadi Sufis such as Abū al-ʿAbbās Ibn ʿAṭā (d. 309/921) (the saying appears in al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1947, p. 12). The second saying "*dhikrī ḥijāb*" belongs to al-Niffarī (al-Niffarī 1996, p. 80; al-Niffarī 1935, p. 85). Any attempt to translate the two sayings is doomed to failure. As for the first, one possible literal translation would be "the one who recalls God's name makes a claim, and the one who endures shows boldness (rashness), and the one who shows gratitude becomes exhausted. The second saying translated by Arberry is 'my recollection is a veil' (al-Niffarī 1935, p. 85). While the word *dhikr* carries different meanings in the cultural history of Islam, including the Qurʾān itself, in Sufi Islam, it indicates the practice of recollecting God's name. In the two sayings, an attempt is made to deprive *dhikr* of its positive connotations. In al-Wāsiṭī's saying, there are two verbs in addition to *dhakara*, and all three imply essential devotional acts asserted in the ethical and dogmatic systems of Islam: recollecting God's name (or reciting from the Qurʾān), enduring life's trials as proof for one's belief in God's predestination (*al-qadāʾ wa l-qadar*), and thanking God for all He does and grants. It is worthwhile to remember that two of these attributes appear in two of the ninety-nine divine names in Islam, that is *ṣabūr* (The Forbearing) and *shakūr* (The Most Grateful). Al-Wāsiṭī undermined the expected narrative effect of these three attributes/actions by attaching to them three verbal forms carrying obvious negative implications. It appears that al-Wāsiṭī was conscious of the selection of three juxtapositions that are at the core of the saying; he intended to shock the listener/reader and lead them to reconsider the three devotional actions in light of the unusual semantic connotations of the saying in question. Al-Niffarī adopts the same narrative strategy by depriving *dhikr* of its long, well-established semantic connotations in Islam by connecting it to its implicit opposite, the veil. To recollect God's name is usually seen as a gate through which one frees one's heart of all earthly attachments (al-Qushayrī 2017, p. 503; al-Sīrjānī 2019, pp. 304–7), but here, it is an obstacle in receiving divine revelations. Is al-Niffarī's saying an example of *shatāḥ*? According to al-Sarrāj, *shatāḥ* is usually caused by what he calls *ishkāl* (abstruseness), a process of analogy (*qiyās*) where the listener automatically compares the content of a *shatāḥ* statement with the set of beliefs and concepts from religious scriptures (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1947, p. 7). Al-Sarrāj viewed this analogy as leading to an immediate clash between a statement's "correct inner meaning" and its scandalous external sense (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1947, p. 12). This clash, according to him, need not lead to heretical accusations of utterers of *shatāḥ* but rather to strengthening one's trust in the utterers' veracity and the desire to understand their ideas.

Al-Niffarī's statement is just one of many mentioned in his *Kitāb al-Mawāqif*. In light of al-Sarrāj's definition, at least in the eyes of Baghdadi Sufis, al-Niffarī's *dhikrī ḥijāb* might not have even been considered *shatāḥ* as opposed to al-Ḥallāj's statements. While scholars of early Islamic piety are still unclear as to the attitude of the Baghdadi-based Sufi institution towards al-Niffarī (Akasoy 2013; Salamah-Qudsi 2019, *Sufism*, pp. 162–86), there is no doubt that he was neglected for three centuries after his death until his writings were collected and celebrated by the followers and students of Ibn ʿArabī. Based on al-Sarrāj's criteria, one can see that the scandalous statements of al-Ḥallāj and al-Niffarī cannot be

considered as *shataḥāt* because the statements have no possible meritorious intentions upon which they were based.

The meritorious intentions behind the ecstatic expressions were not easy to detect even by Sufis themselves. According to one anecdote, Abū Ḥamza al-Ṣūfī (d. 269/882–883 or 289/902), one of the earliest Sufi figures who comes to mind when discussing *shataḥāt*, came to visit al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī at his house. When Abū Ḥamza heard a rooster crowing, he started exclaiming “At your service, my Lord” (*labbayka yā sayyidī*). Allegedly, his guest’s strange behavior made al-Muḥāsibī very furious, so he took a knife and threatened to kill Abū Ḥamza if the latter did not repent of his behavior (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1947, pp. 6–7; al-Dhahabī 1985–1988, vol. 13, p. 167).

One of the major features of ecstatic expressions is its self-conceited and boastful tone. Examples of this are as follows: “Glory be to me! How great is my dignity” (*subḥānī mā aʿẓama shaʿnī*) of Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī (Carl Ernst 1985, p. 11); “I rejected the religion of God; infidelity is my duty, because it is detestable to Muslims” of al-Ḥallāj (this is Carl Ernst’s translation in Ernst 2018, p. 102); “I saw God at the windows of the angelic realm, dawning on me with the qualities of beauty and majesty” of Rūzbihān al-Baqlī (Ernst 1996, p. 74); and “my foot is on the neck of every friend of God” of ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 561/1166). Abū Ḥafṣ al-Suhrawardī, commenting on the last example, stated that this ecstatic expression was motivated by the ego-self (*nafs*) of that honorable Sufi master (al-Suhrawardī 1967, p. 192; Cf. Salamah-Qudsi, *Bayna sayr wa-ṭayr*, pp. 49–50). This is one aspect of the paradox that is at the heart of ecstatic expression; the new state of consciousness brought about by intoxication both weakens the human ego but also brings forth a mystical ego that is replete with divine virtue.

7. Elaborating on the Didactic Outlines of Sufi Sayings

The second and third categories mentioned above include a great deal of didactic sayings, witticisms, or even occasionally profane poems, which are intended to guide Sufi aspirants. These sayings come in an impressive number of narrative garb and draw on diverse sources such as Qurʾān commentary, *ḥadīth*, theology (*kalām*), philosophy, stories of the prophets (*qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*), general ethical treatises, collections of anecdotes, works of cosmology, and poetry. Based on speech act theory, statements of this category have a directive illocutionary force in their attempt to get Sufi disciples to commit to a particular system of thought and practice using verbs of command, request, ask, question, plead, pray, entreat, and advise (Searle 1975, p. 356).

Sufi textbooks of the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries leave the impression that early Sufi masters were interested in particular themes and issues and that each master had his own preferences for what material should be included in his collection. Leaving aside both narrative and structural differences, the very thematic foundation of all these textbooks was dictated by the parallel interests of earlier Sufi masters. Some Sufis then added their own collection of sayings to this common bulk of material, and these were transmitted orally among generations of Sufi masters and disciples. In addition to personal preferences reflected in the very processes of selecting, arranging, and synthesizing these textbooks, authors added their own introductions, epilogues, and commentaries that expressed their own agendas and worldviews. This is why, in reading a textbook like al-Qushayrī’s *al-Risāla* or al-Sīrjānī’s (d. ca. 470/1077) *al-Bayāḍ wa-l-sawād*, one gets the impression that the author was in the company of all the Sufi authorities he quotes and that he asked for their opinions while working on his own manuscript. Each Sufi author had a unique way of stringing together these sayings to form an argument relating not only to individual aspects of Sufi devotion but also to broader dynamics between individual domains, Sufi communities, and society at large. The general orientation of these textbooks asserts the social-communal feature of Sufi piety and voices that imply solitude and isolation are marginal; in cases when these lone voices are integrated in these textbooks, their asociality is usually blurred (al-Sīrjānī 2019, pp. 218–19). Al-Qushayrī, for instance, in his chapter on retreat (*khalwa*) and seclusion (*ʿuzla*), was eager to emphasize that “seclusion

is but separation from reprehensible character traits” and that “its purpose is to turn [bad] qualities into [good] ones, not to withdraw from familiar places [into the desert]” (al-Qushayrī 2017, p. 314; Knysh 2007, pp. 122–23).

Sayings and witticisms integrated in the textbooks of the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries take different forms. Some of them exhibited didactic overtones from the outset, while others were, most probably, adjusted later to serve didactic purposes. Interestingly, some earlier ecstatic expressions were also incorporated into collections of Sufi sayings to serve as a major didactic instrument in the hands of charismatic Sufi masters. Some of al-Hallāj’s sayings, for instance, made their way into al-Qushayrī’s work, and their original ecstatic implications were given a powerful didactic effect. The conciseness, allusiveness, and secrecy of those expressions that had no explicit antinomian features enabled later Sufi authors to reinterpret them along moderate didactic lines (see al-Sarrāj’s reference to the ecstatic saying of al-Hallāj in al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914, pp. 303–304. See also al-Sīrjānī 2019, p. 220). The following are the prevalent narrative forms of those sayings. The examples I have chosen are taken from the following textbooks: al-Sarrāj’s *Lumaʿ*; al-Sulamī’s *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*; al-Qushayrī’s *Risāla*; al-Khargūshī’s *Tahdhīb al-asrār*; al-Sīrjānī’s *al-Bayāḍ wa-l-sawād*; and al-Hujwīrī’s *Kashf al-mahjūb*.

1. Sayings that take the form of terse definitions of certain mystical terms that have nothing to do with Sufi practices. “Love is pleasure (*ladhdha*) and the site of the [divine] reality (*ḥaqīqa*) is bewilderment (*dahsh*)”. This saying is attributed by al-Qushayrī to Abū ʿAlī al-Daqqāq (d. ca. 405/1015) (al-Qushayrī 2017, p. 653; Knysh 2007, p. 328). Such sayings were the building blocks of Sufi dictionaries that were included in early textbooks on Sufism written in the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries. Later on, they circulated as separate books whose language and formal characteristics have been thoroughly examined by Carl Ernst (Ernst 1992, pp. 181–201). In such Sufi dictionaries, definitions of Sufi terms were not designed to facilitate their understanding for outsiders but rather to conceal it from outsiders and restrict it to those who had already had mystical experiences.
2. Sayings that take the form of comparisons or categorizations of degrees and stages. The most common are threefold categorizations, but twofold ones are also present in Sufi textbooks. As an example, one can quote Sahl al-Tustarī (d. ca. 283/896), who said the following: “Unveiling is the beginning of certainty (*yaqīn*) [...] then comes direct witnessing and contemplation [of God] (*muʿāyana wa-mushāhada*)” (al-Qushayrī 2017, p. 432; Knysh 2007, p. 193). Sayings that differentiate between two levels of the same state are very frequent; the first level is the domain of the “ordinary folk” (*al-ʿamma*, or *al-ʿawāmm*), whereas the second, more advanced and preferable state belongs to the spiritual elite (*al-khāṣṣa*, or *al-khawāṣṣ*) (al-Qushayrī 2017, p. 478; Knysh 2007, p. 221). This two-level understanding can also refer to the different levels between renunciants (*zuhhād*) and mystics or between beginner Sufis (*murīdūn*) and those who obtained the sublime degree of divine knowledge (gnostics, *ʿarifūn*) (al-Qushayrī 2017, p. 479; Knysh 2007, p. 221).
3. Sayings that quote Qurʾānic verses. They are used to describe certain Sufi conditions and states. On one occasion of *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, al-Sarrāj quotes al-Nūrī’s definition of the term *maḥw* (effacement; loss of the human volition) (Renard 2005, p. 268) in which the latter relies on one part of Q. 13:39 (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914, p. 355).
4. Sayings that focus on Sufi praxis. In these sayings, a master, usually responding to a question, recounts how he succeeded in mastering a particular Sufi state. State (*ḥāl*) is a spiritual experience usually characterized as fleeting and irretrievable (Renard 2005, pp. 227–28). Commonly based on autobiographical accounts, these sayings provide practical tips for Sufi training; for example, “When Ḥātim al-Aṣamm (d. 237/852) was asked how he had obtained wisdom, he answered: ‘through minimizing food intake, sleeping and speaking’” (al-Sīrjānī 2019, p. 8).

5. Sayings that include dreams and visions. These can be both autobiographical and biographical (al-Sirjānī 2019, p. 7; Abū Nu‘aym 1974, vol. 10, p. 347: the biography of Abū Muḥammad al-Jurayrī).
6. Sayings that include autobiographical anecdotes, generally implying renunciatory customs. Thus, we hear Abū Yazīd say the following: “I did not eat anything people eat for forty years” (al-Sirjānī 2019, p. 13) or the famous anecdote about Ibrāhīm al-Ḥawwās (d. ca. 291/904) whose constant diarrhea did not prevent him from regularly performing the ritual ablution until he drowned in an ablution pool (al-Qushayrī 2017, p. 631).
7. Sayings that focus on ethical behavior and take the form of a positive command or negative prohibition. Sometimes, these sayings come in the form of advice or counsel (*waṣīyya*). Al-Junayd was reported to have said the following: “O’ young man! commit yourself to religious science even when you are granted the mystical states” (al-Sirjānī 2019, p. 29).
8. Sayings that celebrate Sufi piety and Sufis, sometimes at the expense of other groups: “No group is more honorable than this one [the Sufis!] whose science is the most honorable of all sciences” (al-Sirjānī 2019, p. 32).
9. Sayings that relate to cosmological themes such as the creation of the world, the cosmic aspects of the intellect (*‘aql*), the Prophet Muḥammad, the human being, spirit (*rūḥ*), and the lower soul (*nafs*).
10. Sayings focusing on theological issues such as to what part of the human being will be rewarded or punished on the day or resurrection: body, spirit, or both? (al-Sirjānī 2019, p. 392).

Sufi sayings occupied a central position in the Sufi training system. The personal act of reading and studying these materials gradually came to be accompanied or even replaced by the interpersonal processes of training in the framework of the master–disciple’s increasingly powerful relationship. Carl Ernst has suggested the term “the intentionality of the mystical language” to describe mystical language’s flexibility to act beyond its abstract theoretical implications as well as its ability to be an effective instrument for creating the conditions for the desired mystical experiences through teaching and training (Ernst 1992, p. 192).

8. Conclusions

In this article, an attempt has been made to examine the intersections between the corpus of sayings in the Sufi tradition and the changing realities in the period between the third/ninth and seventh/thirteenth centuries. Masters’ sayings were neither mere vessels for abstract theories nor a mere response to changing forms of religious identities. They were a rather powerful engine in and of themselves for the shifts occurring in the Sufi tradition as a whole. The examination of Sufi sayings here attempts to benefit from the major theoretical framework of John Searle’s speech act theory since Sufi sayings have been formulated in so many rhetorical structures which deliver different kinds of meaning intended by both the original speaker/author and later authors whose agenda might be different from the original. Furthermore, this article presents an attempt to categorize the body of sayings in the early Sufi writing tradition between the third/ninth and seventh/thirteenth centuries.

In order to understand the mechanism of using the medium of sayings, we first had to answer some primary questions concerning the creative processes of those sayings: their historical and intellectual values; the ways they were transmitted, selected, and preserved; and their correspondence realities. We also had to determine who, throughout the centuries, was responsible for establishing their structures and rhetoric. The first three sections above were dedicated to two questions. The first question was of sources and transmission, and the second one was the use of silence and speech with particular attention to the way Sufis attempted to express their states of grace (pl. *aḥwāl*, sing. *ḥāl*) using the medium of enigmatic sayings. While the huge number of Sufi sayings proves the victory of speech

over silence, it was through the medium of sayings itself that Sufis kept emphasizing the futility of speech in conveying the very states of proximity. The heritage of Sufi sayings, however, was not only made up of enigmatic and ecstatic sayings; there were many other rhetorical forms that had different functions and acted as effective instruments in the hands of charismatic masters. These masters used these sayings both as part of their training system in their quest to establish their own authority as well as in their pursuit to establish a collective identity and institution.

In order to trace the correlation between the sayings that were collected and put into writing and the different components of the socio-religious and intellectual contexts, this paper also attempted to categorize the bulk of sayings collected in the period under discussion according to both prevailing rhetoric and themes as well as an examination of their position in the Sufi training system.

Despite the methodological difficulty in verifying the authenticity of sayings, this paper argues that there were three different phases in the development of Sufi sayings and that these phases corresponded with three general directions in the production, transmission, and use of the medium of sayings. These directions revealed the unique ways in which Sufis used sayings to both interact and to correspond with certain realities in specific time periods. The first refers to the rise of Sufism during the late second/eighth and early third/ninth centuries. Sayings of the first category served the intimate closed community of early Sufis who struggled to protect their mode of piety against their opponents. Sayings of this category illustrate two major qualities: ambiguity in relating mystical experiences and self-defense where there have been extensive attempts to reconcile Islamic law with Sufi ideas.

The second category, from the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries, covers sayings whose focus is on the Sufi lexicon and Sufi rituals as well as ecstatic states and expressions. Sayings of this category were preserved in the textbooks of the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries, which was the stage of the consolidation of the Sufi identity and institution.

Sayings of the third category were extensively transmitted in Sufi circles and writings from the sixth/twelfth century onwards, and they pay less attention to ecstatic states, expressions, and Sufi lexicon but rather celebrate the communal–institutional aspects of Sufi activities including Sufi rituals, the hierarchies of initiation to the Sufi path, and the polar opposite opinions that existed between masters.

Sufi sayings acted as a powerful instrument in the hands of charismatic Sufi masters who used it to assert their exclusive authority over Sufi knowledge and the practical guidance of its seekers. The need to preserve this powerful authority over new generations of mystical seekers prompted Sufi teachers to produce ever-new sayings and witticisms that could be retroactively ascribed to early masters in Sufi manuals, dictionaries, and biographies (Knysh 2017, pp. 144–51). There were a great deal of didactic sayings, witticisms, or even occasionally profane poems which were intended to guide Sufi aspirants. These sayings come in an impressive number of narrative garb and draw on diverse sources such as Qurʾān commentary, *ḥadīth*, theology (*kalām*), philosophy, stories of the prophets, general ethical treatises, collections of anecdotes, works of cosmology, and poetry. Throughout the centuries of its development, Sufi tradition increasingly relied on sayings as the preferable medium for instruction, and new didactic forms were constantly introduced. Besides the plain didactic forms, early sayings with ecstatic features were sometimes employed and their contents transformed to serve practical-didactic needs.

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