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Poetry and Ritual:  
The Physical Expression of Homoerotic Imagery in *sama*

by

Zachary Holladay

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Religious Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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## Acknowledgments

During my years as an undergraduate and graduate student, I noticed a severe lack of academic material on gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (GLBT) issues and Islam. Thus, this thesis was inspired by a desire to explore the unexplored. And while my final product did not explore explicit links between homosexuality and Islam, the emphasis on homoeroticism as reflected in early Islamic mystical literature will, hopefully, establish a foundation for further research in this deficient area.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Sufi poetry of the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 CE/132-655 AH) exhibited a particular penchant for highlighting the relationship between humankind and God with homoerotic language. While the homoerotic nature of Sufi poetry has received considerable scholarly attention, the ritual expression of such literature has not. The ritual of *sama* was a practice that occurred in the Sufi institutions and incorporated various elements of the poetry examined. By listening to the poetry, in the form of song and often with accompanying instrumentation, the mystics would experience transient moments of altered state experiences, usually interpreted as moments of union with God.

This thesis seeks to align the homoerotic verse with ritual, and thus demonstrating the incorporation and sublimation of sexuality in medieval Sufi society. By focusing on the works of four specific Arab Sufi poets, Abu al-Husayn al-Nuri, Abu Bakr al-Shibli, Umar Ibn al-Farid, and Muhyiddin Ibn al-Arabi, a distinct tendency to express passionate love for the Divine emerges. Furthermore, the portrayal of the Divine in masculine terms reflected, not necessarily homosexual love, but the intimate bonding between men experienced in a sex-segregated society.

## Introduction

The medieval literature of Islamic mysticism, or Sufism (*tasawwuf*), accommodated an extensive genre of poetry concerning humanity's quest for intimacy with God. The mystics who created that literature sublimated the language of eroticism, exhibiting a unique orientation to homoerotic imagery. While some mystics adopted heteroerotic symbolism, there existed a parallel tradition "in which the love of God [was] represented using the imagery of romantic relationships between males."<sup>1</sup> Homoeroticism, as reflected in the mystical poetry, did not necessarily suggest homosexual activity in Sufi ritual life.<sup>2</sup> Rather the homoerotic language was indicative of a "male-to-male symbolic structure in which the mystical encounters [were] framed along same-sex lines."<sup>3</sup>

During the Abbasid era (750-1258 CE/132-655 AH), a strict segregation of women was established, reserving political and public life for men and thus allowing for homosocial interactions at multiple levels of society. Homoeroticism, then, may be understood as a "natural outgrowth of a sex-positive, sex-segregating religion in which women had little status or value."<sup>4</sup> The bonding between men in the Sufi institutions reinforced the love language in poetry, as men shared intimate spiritual experiences, such as the exchange of esoteric knowledge and engaging in ritual practices, with one another.

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Wafer, "Vision and Passion," in *Islamic Homosexualities*, eds. Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 107.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Ernst writes: "There may have been individuals who used mystical terms to cloak their immorality; but there is very little historical evidence available on them" (*Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), 120.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism & Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Vern Bullough, *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (New York: Wiley, 1976), 238.

One particular ritual of the Sufi brotherhoods was *sama*. An Arabic term generally translated as “audition,” *sama* referred to a communal Sufi ritual that accentuated the inherent power of recited poetry to induce altered states of consciousness, which were interpreted as moments of temporary union with the Divine. The ritual integrated a range of aural stimulation, including recited love poetry, always in the form of song, often with accompanying instrumentation.

The purpose of this analysis is to correlate the homoerotic imagery of mystical love poetry with the ritual components of *sama*, thus revealing the sublimation of sexuality in pre-modern Sufi society. This thesis will focus on Sufi poetry composed under the Abbasid Caliphate, from the works of Abu al-Husayn al-Nuri (d. 907 CE/295 AH), Abu Bakr al-Shibli (d. 946 CE/334 AH), Umar Ibn al-Farid (d. 1235 CE/632 AH), and Muhyiddin Ibn al-Arabi (d. 1240 CE/638 AH). These four prominent mystics were of the more prolific and acclaimed mystical authors writing in Arabic during the Abbasid period; and translations of their works will provide specific examples of homoerotic verse.

The affective potency of Arabic Sufi verse depended on its ancestral prototypes of the pre-Islamic era, or *Jahiliya* (“Age of Ignorance”). Early Arabic oral verse was composed in form of the ode (*qasidah*), which demonstrated a sophisticated system of metrics and rhyming.<sup>5</sup> The pre-Islamic ode was the consequence of “a tribal desert society with its own ethos and values,” and was created to reinforce those values.<sup>6</sup> Public

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<sup>5</sup> Arabic language has a rich capacity for verbal and metrical elaboration, with a rich standing vocabulary and a strong oral received tradition of poetic production and transmission. See William Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> M.M. Badawi, “Abbasid Poetry and its Antecedents” in *Abbasid Belles-Lettres*, eds. Julia Ashtiany, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 147.

recitation, in the form of song, served a variety of social purposes, including elegy toward patrons and satire towards rival poets and their tribes. The contents of such poems resonated with the values and experiences of Bedouin life, providing a strong source of shared identity and cultural tradition.

Beginning in the seventh century CE/first century AH, with rise of Islam and the early Arab conquest, an important transformation in Arabic verse occurred, one that was more relevant to the new “social, intellectual, and spiritual reality” of Islam.<sup>7</sup> Poets no longer lamented the toils of tribal warfare and the bleakness of death. Rather the new religion provided a meaningful alternative, and poetry reflected a more positive perception of society and the meaning of individual existence. The poet remained a forceful presence in the caliphal courts, producing verse of wine and love, since “princes had greater leisure than Bedouin chieftains to listen to soft music and to savor dancing and song.”<sup>8</sup>

One surviving motif of the pre-Islamic era that continued into the courts was the poetic trope of Majnun, as lover, wandering the scattered abandoned encampments that adorn the Arabian Desert, searching for his beloved Layla. The intensity of his longing was relayed with impressions of insanity and obsession. His very name, translated as “possessed by the spirits (*jinn*),” in Islam came to indicate “madness,” and the literary character of Majnun was inflamed with love as though he was taken over by the spirits of the desert.<sup>9</sup> The loss of rational self represented by Majnun mirrored that of the oracular and gnomic poets of the pre-Islamic era who were understood to have composed while

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<sup>7</sup> Badawi, “Abbasid Poetry,” 148.

<sup>8</sup> A.J. Arberry, *Arabic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Sells, *Stations of Desire: Love Elegies from Ibn ‘Arabi and New Poems* (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2000), 20.



possessed by the *jinn*. That language of intense yearning transformed into a complex homoerotic allegory under the caliphates, with the lover “metamorphosed into the poet seeking the prince’s favor, his perhaps unattainable beloved.”<sup>10</sup> Thus the praises of the tribe converted to the praises of the highest bidder, a panegyric serving to exaggerate the prowess of the patron.

The love trope underwent another transformation in Sufi poetry. By sublimating the erotic themes so prevalent in the poetry of the Abbasid and Umayyad courts, many Sufis articulated a homoerotic longing for God. The hyperbolic verse of love for the patron was reconstructed by the mystics as the metaphoric verse of mystical love for the Divine.<sup>11</sup> And Majnun, the impassioned wanderer seeking his beloved, transformed into the Islamic mystic, meandering the vast expanse of existence for the Beloved.

At the heart of Sufi poesy was the desire for unity with the Divine. Allusions to moments of union in the poetry were emblematic of a mystical experience of the total annihilation of the human self in God (*fana fi allah*). That momentary unitive experience signified a transcendence of the normal consciousness of ego-separation from the Divine. Indeed the state (*hal*) of *fana* was momentary, a fleeting union with the ultimate source of creation. For the Sufi, that moment was the “unveiling” of divine Unity (*Tawhid*), and a revelation to the mystic that “separation” from God was illusory. Many Sufis, especially those examined here, perceived reality as an emanation of God, interpreting nature as a reflection of sublime essence.

Poetic creation, however, required spiritual maturity from the mystic, because the “free and inspired flow of words can result only from a perfect conformity” to the

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<sup>10</sup> Arberry, *Arabic Poetry*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Divine.<sup>12</sup> The outpouring of words, therefore, may be deemed an unconscious composition, with the poet “too overwhelmed by the flow of images and words to be able to manipulate them in a technical way.”<sup>13</sup> In that case, the poem was propelled not by an intellectual concentration on composition, but by contemplating the harmonious nature of the divinely-created cosmos.

The vigorous appetite for that intimate engagement with God spurned the varying technical methods of the Sufi path (*tariqa*), which were “rules, rituals, and pious formulas, which the *shaykh* (master) imposed upon his disciples in order to purify them of sins and of mundane concerns and to instill in them absolute serenity.”<sup>14</sup> Stations (*maqamat*) of the *tariqa* were arranged as sequential levels of ascension that the disciple traversed to the Divine. After reaching the highest station, which in many cases was that of “satisfaction” (*rida*), the traveler reached the transition point between the stations and the states (*ahwal*).<sup>15</sup> The states were bestowed by divine grace to the Sufi, and unlike the stations, were not achieved by effort. They were transient moments of consciousness and could emerge in impressions of joy, sorrow, ecstasy (*wajd*), among others.

While specific stations accompanying the path, and the rules of conduct exclusive to each one of them differed from one Sufi master to another, most agree that the state (*hal*) of the ultimate Reality (*al-Haqq*) was the ultimate goal of the Sufi *tariqa*.<sup>16</sup> The manifold “devotional techniques and styles of spiritual guidance...gave rise to a wide

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<sup>12</sup> Patrick Laude, *Singing the Way: Insights In Poetry and Spiritual Transformation* (New York: World Wisdom, Inc., 2005), 56.

<sup>13</sup> Laude, *Singing the Way*, 56.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2000), 172.

<sup>15</sup> Frederick Denny, *An Introduction to Islam* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), 231.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

array of Sufi ‘ways’ that served as sources of identity for various Sufi groups.”<sup>17</sup> In spite of the heterogeneous methodologies of *tariqa* Sufism, several customary spiritual exercises, shared by many different Sufi orders, were institutionalized and over time, became more rigidly ritualized. Those practices included spiritual retreat (*khalwa*), chanting the names of God (*dhikr*), and ritualized performance of verse with music (*sama*).

Recitation of Sufi poetry at *sama* gatherings fostered the momentary unitive experience desired by many mystics, bridging the presumed distance between humankind and God. At those communal occasions, which comprised exclusively of men, poetry was sung by the one among the group with a particularly beautiful voice. The language of passion and desire for the Divine, which was relayed with homoerotic imagery, was an evocative force that, along with body movements, prompted the varying states.

Through an interpretation of homoerotic mystical poetry, we can begin to formulate a historic interrelation between verse and the physical enactment of ritual in a homosocial environment. The first chapter of this thesis addresses the themes of love and desire as they exist in the Quran. Revelation is the primary source of inspiration for the poetry of longing and love for God, providing scriptural legitimacy to the tropes of homoerotic mystical poetry. Chapter two concerns the practice of *sama*, and its varying components, to provide context for the ritual performance of Sufi poetry. The third chapter is the analysis of homoerotic poetry and its relation to *sama*. An examination of the symbiotic relationship between the two will afford a glimpse into the homosocial environment of the pre-modern Sufi culture. Finally the conclusion will provide implications of the physical expression of homoerotic Sufi poetry.

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<sup>17</sup> Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, 302.

## Chapter 1: Themes of Love and Desire in the Quran

Two particular themes presented in this thesis include love and desire, which are recurrent tropes magnified by Sufis as metaphors for the soul's yearning for intimacy with God. This chapter considers how the themes of love and desire are incorporated and interpreted in the greatest textual authority of the Islamic tradition: the Quran. Sufi poets, relying on their authoritative presence in the revelatory text, masterfully employ these concepts in verse to express an incessant longing for the God.

Shortly after its compilation during the caliphate of Uthman Ibn Affan (644-656 CE/23-35 AH) and subsequent dissemination, the Quran inspired interpretations (*tafsir*) spanning theological, philosophical, scientific, and mystical approaches. For the ordinary believer, the Quran serves as a guide, defining moral and ethical parameters and providing purpose. Yet for the Islamic scholar, the holy text solicits intensive analysis and elucidation. A certain audacity is required from the exegete (*mufassir*) who wishes to penetrate effectively the multiple layers of meaning inherent in the Quran. From these intrepid scholars, we can grasp an image of the Quran that is boundless in interpretation and definition, an infinite "ocean of knowledge" that beckons keen observation.<sup>18</sup>

It is therefore unsurprising that an overabundance of commentary on the contents of the revelatory text exists. The writings of Muslim exegetes impart critical insight into the Quran, granting scholars of religion access to the conglomerate of diverging opinions and allowing them to identify individual themes within the text. Before an examination of love and desire, as they are delineated in the Quran, it is necessary to distinguish the parts

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<sup>18</sup> The proverbial expression "ocean of knowledge" is frequently employed, by scholars of religion and Muslim commentators, to articulate the incalculability of divine Oneness (*Tawhid*). See Q. 18:109.

of the soul that are connected to the feelings of love and desire. In the Sufi tradition, the interplay of soul, love, and desire forge the foundation of the mystical trope of lover longing for the divine Beloved.

### 1.1 Soul in the Quran

Though the nature of the soul is a matter of dispute among some Islamic scholars, most Muslims agree that a soul, engendered by God, inhabits every human being and at death, is released from the body and reunited with the body on the resurrection day.<sup>19</sup> In the Quran, two words in Arabic that are used equally to signify the soul are *ruh* and *nafs*, though their implications are quite different. The term *ruh*, which is translated as “breath” or “spirit,” occurs twenty-one times in the holy text.<sup>20</sup> In many of these instances, *ruh* refers to the spirit of revelation. For example, Muhammad is beseeched to identify God as the patron of truth: “Say that the Holy Spirit (*ruh al-qudus*) has brought the Revelation with the Truth step by step from your Lord, to strengthen the believers and as guidance and good news to the devout” (Q. 16:102).

In other cases, the term *ruh* indicates the “breath of life” given by God.<sup>21</sup> The quranic conception of Jesus is a testification to this: “And Mary, the daughter of ‘Imran, she guarded her chastity, so We breathed into her from Our spirit, and she accepted the truth of the words of her Lord and His Books and she was of the obedient ones” (Q. 66:12). The story of Mary resonates in the quranic passages concerned with the creation

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Emil Homerin, “Soul” in *Encyclopaedia of the Quran*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Leiden and Boston: E.J. Brill, 2002, vol. V), 80.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Sells, “Spirit” in *Encyclopaedia of the Quran*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Leiden and Boston: E.J. Brill, 2002, vol. V), 114.

of Adam where God commands the angels to recognize the pre-eminent creation: “When I have shaped him and breathed from My Spirit into him, bow down before him” (Q. 38:72). Again, the above quotation serves to establish *ruh* as an extension of God’s breath/spirit innate to the human. *Ruh*, therefore, is the eternal divine substance within the human.

*Nafs*, like *ruh*, is derived from a root meaning “breath,” but actually implies the “self.”<sup>22</sup> While similar etymologically, *nafs*, as it operates in the Quran, is entirely distinct from *ruh*. *Nafs* can pertain to a number of beings, including humans, the jinn, Satan, and even God. Furthermore, *nafs*, which is grounded in the corporeal body and its senses, can be corrupted or become out of balance, referring to negative traits such as selfishness, greed, and lust. The Quran warns: “Be mindful of God as much as you can; hear and obey; be charitable—it is for your own good. Those who are saved from their own meanness (*nafsihi*) will be the prosperous ones” (Q. 64:16). In this context, the term *nafs* applies to a property of one’s character.

Fazlur Rahman, in his *Major Themes of the Quran*, defines *nafs* as representing “states, aspects, dispositions, or tendencies of the human personality.”<sup>23</sup> In this regard, the Quran does not distinguish *nafs* as separate from the physical body. On the contrary, it defines the “inner person,” or conscience, as it exists within the human body.<sup>24</sup> The Quran, for instance, advises the adherent to heed the “self-reproaching soul” (*al-nafs al-lawwama*) to ensure resistance against selfish impulses (Q. 75:2). In other verses, however, the *nafs* denotes the human body. When God commands Moses to go to Egypt,

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<sup>22</sup> Homerin, “Soul,” 81. The word *nafasa*, for example, means “to breathe,” though it does not occur in the Quran.

<sup>23</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Quran* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, Inc., 1989), 17.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

Moses replies: “Lord, I killed one (*nafs*) of their men, and I fear that they may kill me” (Q.28:33). And with regards to stipulating punishment, the Quran states: “In the Torah We prescribed to them that life (*nafs*) is for life, and eye for eye, and nose for nose...” (Q. 5:45). It is thus evident that the *nafs* is not a soul that is independent of the physical body; rather the *nafs* epitomizes the life force connected to the flesh, influencing the desires of the flesh, which dies and is rejoined to the body at resurrection (*yawm al-Qiyama*).<sup>25</sup>

## 1.2 Love in the Quran

The corporeal emotion of love is determined by the *nafs*. The Quran dictates that lasciviousness must be subdued in order to achieve salvation: “For anyone who feared the meeting with his Lord and restrained himself (*nafs*) from base desires, Paradise will be home” (Q. 79:40-41). While love associated with faith is sanctioned by the Quran, the love for “base desires,” which is a corruption of the *nafs*, is strongly condemned. The verb *ahabba* and its related noun *hubb* are often employed for the inordinate love of earthly possessions and concupiscent pursuits: “And you love wealth with a passion” (Q. 89:20).<sup>26</sup>

The Quran acknowledges an inevitable love within the human heart that lusts after things and people: “The love of desirable things is made alluring for men—women, children, gold and silver treasures piled up high, horses with fine markings, livestock, and farmland—these may be the joys of this life, but God has the best place to return to” (Q.

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<sup>25</sup> Homerin, “Soul,” 84.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 235.

3:14). Yet love of God is promulgated to neutralize the “love of desirable things” and direct the believer on a path of fidelity to the Divine. In the same way that humankind is predisposed to sensual desires, “God has endeared (*habbaba*) the faith to you and has made it beautiful to your hearts” (Q. 49:7). So it seems the human heart is incessantly torn between two antithetical loves: one of excessive desire and one of conformity to divine will.<sup>27</sup>

The recurrent verb *ahabba*, and the verbal noun *mahabba*, are also applied in the Quran to articulate love between humankind and God.<sup>28</sup> The Divine initiates love for humankind, a point alluded to when Moses is informed of his foreordained mission: “I showered you with My love and planned that you should be reared under My watchful eye” (Q. 20:39). Moreover, God is designated as “the Loving” (*al-Wadud*) and in both verses where this title is given (Q. 85:14, 11:90), the qualities of forgiveness and mercy are detailed. It is apparent that God’s love, germane to compassion and mercy, is imparted to humankind and, in turn, is reciprocated by their faith (*iman*) and their righteous acts (*ihsan*).

There are conspicuously few verses in the Quran that expound love between humans. Many of the passages that pertain to marriage, for example, are relayed in terms that are more legal than emotional.<sup>29</sup> The chapter titled *Surat al-Nisa* (“The Women”) defines the various formalities of marriage, such as the treatment of women, laws of inheritance, and guidelines for managing disagreements between spouses. However, no language of love or affection is present in any of these verses. Certain passages

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<sup>27</sup> Denis Gril, “Love and Affection” in *Encyclopaedia of the Quran*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Leiden and Boston: E.J. Brill, 2002, vol. III), 235.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.



addressing conjugal affection proceed by indicating its sacred origins: “Another of His signs is that He created spouses from among yourselves for you to live with in tranquility: He ordained love (*mawadda*) and kindness between you” (Q. 30:21). This verse demonstrates the Islamic ideal of marriage, which not only serves the purpose of increasing the human population, but also that of the spiritual advancement of the man and the woman by referring to the quietness of mind which they find in each other.

The material on divine and human love in the Quran, while in limited supply, presents a conception of love as coming from and returning to its sublime source, as God is the source and finality of all creation. Yet God also requires the devotion from believers before divine love can be imparted, as “God does not love those who ignore His commands” (Q. 3:32).

The reciprocal relationship of love between humankind and the Divine performed a crucial role in the Sufi quest for unity. For example, Rashid al-Din al-Maybudi (d. 1135 CE/529 AH), in his commentary, elaborated on a specific verse of the Quran which states: “If you love God, follow me, and God will love you and forgive you your sins” (Q. 3:31). Al-Maybudi juxtaposed mystical terminology with quranic verse by aligning the first part of the quote, “If you love God,” to the Sufi concept of separation (*tafriqa*), and the second part, “God will love you,” to the concept of union (*jam*).<sup>30</sup>

Love, then, in the Sufi sense, was predicated on the content of the Quran. Various Sufi adepts, including Muhyiddin Ibn al-Arabi (d. 1240 CE/638 AH), relied on the Quran to formulate their theories on the metaphysical doctrine of love, providing foundational support for the mystical interpretation of love and thus rendering a sense of authority to

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<sup>30</sup> Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Quran in Classical Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 74.

Sufi doctrines and practice.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the transformation from carnal love, which, according to the Quran, desired passion and material wealth, to divine love was dependent on a purification of the *nafs*. The process of cleansing the *nafs* was determined by the various rituals Sufis engaged in, including listening to poetry and music in *sama* sessions.

### 1.3 Desire in the Quran

The theme of desire is exercised through three particular agencies in the Quran: divine, satanic, and human.<sup>32</sup> Of the three, God's desires are referred to most frequently, often expressed through variations of the verb *arada*: "When We will something to happen (*idha aradnahu*), all that We say is 'Be,' and it is" (Q. 16:40). Divine desire implicates humans in a direct relationship with God. It is the will of God that allows humans to achieve salvation: "When God wishes to guide someone, He opens their breast to *islam*; when He wishes to lead them astray, He closes and constricts their breast as if they were climbing up to the skies" (Q. 6:125). Those who are "astray," or the nonbelievers, reject God and direct their desires elsewhere, while those who surrender to the will of the Divine "become conscious of, and act on, their desires for divine grace and mercy."<sup>33</sup>

Satan is an instrumental force in bifurcating humankind into believers and nonbelievers. As a reaction to his expulsion from heaven, Satan desires to tempt humans

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<sup>31</sup> Gril, "Love," 236.

<sup>32</sup> Amila Buturovic, "Wish and Desire" in *Encyclopaedia of the Quran*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Leiden and Boston: E.J. Brill, 2002, vol. V), 484.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 486. See Q. 18:30-44.

away from God, making promises that are never fulfilled and deceiving them: “I will certainly take my due share of Your servants; I will mislead them and incite vain desires in them” (Q. 4:118-119). Satan strives to redirect human desire away from the Divine and to himself.

Hence human desire is in constant tension between divine and satanic wishes. Those who desire the pleasures of the terrestrial realm are ignorant of the Divine and will not experience the superior pleasures of the afterlife: “Yet you prefer the life of this world, even though the Hereafter is better and more lasting” (Q. 87:16-17). On the other hand, those who desire the knowledge of God will be rewarded: “As for those who believe and do good deeds...they will have Gardens of lasting bliss graced with flowing streams” (Q. 18:30-31). Ultimately divine wishes prevail, indicative of God’s omnipotent ability to make humans aware of the ways to recognize their ultimate desires.

In the Sufi worldview, the theme of desire signaled a more intimate relationship between the Divine and humankind. By relying on the language of the Quran, the mystics defined desire as “a spiritual propeller that allows the wayfarer to achieve closeness with God.”<sup>34</sup> In Sufi literature, the wayfarer is characterized by the term *murid* (“seeker”), which is the active participle of *arada*.<sup>35</sup> Sufis fostered the quranic phrase, “seek nothing but His Face (*wajh*),” which occurs in several places (Q. 6:52, 92:20), in order to express the beauty of human form as a manifestation of the Divine.<sup>36</sup> The desire for God was thus a personalized endeavor, with the Sufi yearning for the affection of and intimacy with the Divine in this life. While most Sufis rejected the possibility of actually visualizing the

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<sup>34</sup> Buturovic, “Wish and Desire,” 486.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Jamal Elias, “Face of God” in *Encyclopaedia of the Quran*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Leiden and Boston: E.J. Brill, 2002, vol. II), 161.

face of God, they did focus on “two different notions of how he could be made visually manifest, through his theophanic manifestation in the created world (*tajalli*) and through the heart (*qalb*).”<sup>37</sup>

*Qalb*, often translated as “heart,” when ignited by true faith, is the “organ” capable of discovering the essence of all things. The insight one acquires through the heart produces awareness of one’s actions, illuminating the human conscience. L. Gardet writes, “*Qalb* is not only the faculty of knowing, it is also the seat of all moral impulses, both evil desires and instincts, and the struggle to be free of them and attentive to divine teaching.”<sup>38</sup> The Sufi’s burning desire for God allowed for the heart to melt, and hence be purified, exposing it to divine knowledge. The Sufi of poetic expression who has succeeded in achieving an advanced awareness composed from the purified heart, rendering verse a dissemination of grace through the power of language.

The themes of love and desire that are elucidated in the Quran resonate in Sufi poetry. For the mystic, the uncreated and infinite Quran, “‘poetry’ in the highest sense,” was a primary source of inspiration for poetic commentary.<sup>39</sup> The cadency of Revelation, which epitomizes the harmonious nature of the cosmos, empowered the poet to emulate its structure through verse. Thus on its greatest level, poetry “reproduces the qualitative order of the cosmos” and allows for one to contemplate Creation in the harmonic structure of poetry.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Elias, “Face,” 161.

<sup>38</sup> L. Gardet, “Kalb” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs (Brill, 2008) [Brill Online](http://www.encyislam.brill.nl.proxy.usf.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0424), [http://www.encyislam.brill.nl.proxy.usf.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=islam\\_COM-0424](http://www.encyislam.brill.nl.proxy.usf.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0424), (accessed March 24, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Laude, *Singing The Way*, 50.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

By adapting the love ornamentation of secular genres, the mystics of the Abbasid era created a unique poetic amalgamation of sensual images and sacred principles. While the love trope in Sufi poetry was expressed as passion (*ishq*), rather than the quranic *mahabba*, which articulates a more chaste emotion, the poetry is rooted in the love discourse of the Quran. Language of yearning and desire, by conforming to the testament of Revelation, was directed to the Divine and away from the ephemeral. In order to achieve and maintain the ideals of the path (*tariqa*) to union (*wajd*), the Sufi was required to control the carnal soul (*nafs*), which was incessantly tempted by the pleasures of the world. The recitation of Sufi poetry at *sama* gatherings was a powerful force for testing and controlling the *nafs* and fostered the momentary unitive experience desired by many mystics. Poetry allowed for the spiritual realities of *sama* to materialize. The utility of recited verse to induce altered states during *sama*, which will be explored more sufficiently below, professed its mysterious capacity to fill “the gap that separates the human soul from the Divine Presence.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Laude, *Singing The Way*, 62.

## Chapter 2: Sufi sama

The word *sama* is translated as “audition,” “hearing,” or “listening” and denotes the ritual of particular relevance to the mystical poetry. In general terms, *sama* entails listening to poetry, often accompanied by music, to achieve the momentary unitive experience with the Divine. The purpose of this chapter is to elaborate on the ritual, providing the substance of its definition, the multiple elements of its enactment, and its criticism by non-Sufis and consequent defense by Sufis.

### 2.1 Defining sama

The practice of *sama* mirrors the diverse nature of Sufism, as its execution and objective can vary according to the individual Sufi *tariqa*. Kenneth Avery, in *A Psychology of Early Sufi sama*, provides an ambitious survey of several highly influential examples of Arabic and Persian Sufi reference literature, including, among others, the *Ihya Ulum al-Din (Revival of the Religious Sciences)* of Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (d. 1111 CE/505 AH) and the *Kitab al-Luma fi 'l-Tasawwuf (Book of Splendors Concerning the Sufi Way)* of Abu Nasr al-Sarraj (d. 988 CE/378 AH). Each of these source texts addresses the practice of *sama* in distinctive ways, identifying different stations and states, rules of etiquette, and interpretations of its effects. Al-Ghazzali's definition in the *Ihya*, for example, involves an elaborate semantic range, incorporating hierarchical language to specify the various levels of proficiency in *sama*. Commenting on the final moment of the mystical experience, he writes: “This is the last stage of those who are

faithful in understanding (*fahm*) and ecstasy (*wajd*), and is the highest of these stages, for *sama* through states (*ahwal*) is lower than the stages of perfection... which is that the subject should pass away totally from himself and his states.”<sup>42</sup> Al-Sarraj, in the *Luma*, uses the term rather infrequently throughout his work, while engaging subtle and cryptic language to evoke the ineffability of the experience. He writes of the highest *sama* as being “in God, and to God, and is from God, and is directed to God.”<sup>43</sup>

Given the ritual’s multivalent quality, it is difficult to grasp a precise definition of the term. Rather than focusing solely on its ceremonial attributes, Avery defines *sama* with regard to its psychological impacts, since even chance occurrences, such as the call to prayer by the *muadhdhin* or the unintentional overhearing of recited poetry, are defined by some of the Sufis as *sama* as they could act as “powerful trigger(s) for altered state experiences.”<sup>44</sup> By amplifying the definition of *sama* to incorporate the chance occurrences of “listening” that prompt “altered states,” Avery extends the term’s applicability to include “a wider field of auditory events described in the source texts.”<sup>45</sup>

In view of the extraordinarily diverse and subjective nature of *sama*, one can apprehend the complexities of defining such a term. While defining *sama* with respect to the ecstasy or spiritual acumen that the mystic acquires from simply “listening” is more compatible with the earliest instances of its emergence, the Sufi Arabic poetry necessitates a more specific understanding of the term. For the purposes of this thesis, *sama* is defined as a devotional practice of listening to poetry, often accompanied by

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<sup>42</sup> Al-Ghazzali, *Ihya*, quoted in Kenneth Avery, *A Psychology of Early Sufi sama* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 63.

<sup>43</sup> Al-Sarraj, *Luma*, quoted in Avery, *Psychology*, 60.

<sup>44</sup> Avery, *Psychology*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

music, that serves to “induce emotional transports (*tawajud*), states of grace (*ahwal*), and direct encounters with the Divine Reality (*wajd*).”<sup>46</sup>

## 2.2 The Ritual Elements of *Sama*

According to the Sufi source texts, *sama* performed by the thirteenth century CE/seventh century AH was an established ritual, compelling etiquette and a formalized hierarchy. Although the precise history of *sama* is difficult to chronicle, numerous accounts in the source texts reveal an apparent evolution of the practice. Sufi *sama* did not appear prior to the middle of the ninth century CE/third century AH, though ritualized dancing and singing were common exercises among practitioners of the pre-Islamic Middle Eastern religions.<sup>47</sup> However, within Islam, *sama* may be understood as a “natural development” out of quranic recitation.<sup>48</sup>

Annemarie Schimmel, influential scholar of Islam, writes: “The beginning of *sama* is probably that the mystics were enchanted by a beautiful voice or even a causal word that fitted into their current state of mind and thus engendered a spiritual uplifting.”<sup>49</sup> There are early accounts of moving recitations of the Quran which produced fainting spells or, in the case of Abu Hafis al-Haddad (d.879 CE/265 AH), suspended one’s proclivity to pain. According to tradition, al-Haddad, while one day working as a blacksmith, became so enamored by a recited quranic verse that he lost consciousness

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<sup>46</sup> Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, 323.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. One can presume an incorporation of those earlier rituals by the Sufis, though a severe lack of sources precludes a more definitive answer.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1975), 180.



and, in place of tongs, used his hand to extract the molten iron.<sup>50</sup> Other early accounts of *sama* mention listeners whirling ecstatically, tearing their clothes, and even acquiring supernatural strength.<sup>51</sup>

Around the ninth century CE/third century AH, *samakhanas*, or houses devoted to the spiritual practice of listening to music, were founded in Baghdad.<sup>52</sup> The events that occurred within those establishments, often appearing sensually charged to the non-Sufi observer, attracted the ire of the religious authorities (*ulama*). The synthesis of music and recited verse was an arousing force, motivating those in attendance to rise in ecstasy (*wajd*) and move their bodies to the rhythm of the song. The controversy forced many Sufi theorists to actively defend *sama* by clarifying the terms of its performance and its purpose.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, the attempts to safeguard *sama* from censure allowed it, in many respects, to formalize over time. Repelling the criticisms directed at the ritual from the *ulama*, many of whom were already suspicious of Sufism, contributed to the development of regulations, definitive roles, and typologies.

By the thirteenth century CE/seventh century AH, an abundant supply of material on *sama* was available. While signifying a more systematic approach to the ritual, the writings also exhibit deep divisions among the Sufi circles. The expressed Muslim opinions on *sama* “run the gamut from exuberant practice, to cautious acceptance, to complete rejection.”<sup>54</sup> The debated matters of its actual enactment include the types of instruments used, the presence of novices, and the sublimation of erotic poetry to

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<sup>50</sup> Farid al-Din Attar, *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*, trans. A.J. Arberry (Ames, Iowa: Omphaloskepsis), <http://www.omphaloskepsis.com/ebooks/pdf/mussm.pdf> (accessed March 24, 2008), 258-259.

<sup>51</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical*, 181. See also Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Quran* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2001).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> For greater analysis of the *sama* debate, see the chapter titled “The Sama Polemic” in Nelson, *Art of Reciting*.

<sup>54</sup> Arthur Gribetz, “Sama Controversy: Sufi vs. Legalist,” *Studia Islamica*, 74, 1991, 43.

articulate the Sufi's love for the Divine. Additionally the aim of *sama* is disputed in the writings. For some, the climax of *sama*, the ecstatic union between human and God, was discerned as a genuine annihilation of self. For others, *sama* could only provide the worshipper with an experience that was similar, but ultimately inferior, to that which occurs at death, the final unity of the believer with God.

Despite the heterogeneity of *sama*, it is possible to extract a paradigmatic experience of the ritual, as it existed during the medieval era, from the writings of mystics. Typically, the ritual would take place inside the *samakhana*, which was also a hostel for traveling Sufis, though they would also take place at the tomb of a Sufi saint (*zawiya*). Ibn Jubayr (d. 1217 CE/614 AH), a traveler and poet from al-Andalus, visited the *samakhana*s of Damascus and described them in some detail:

They are ornamented palaces through all of which flow streams of water, presenting as delightful a picture as anyone could wish for. The members of this type of Sufi organization are really the kings in these parts, since God has provided for them over and above the material things of this life, freeing their minds from concern with the need to earn their living so that they can devote themselves to His service...Their mode of conducting their forms of worship is peculiar. Their custom of assembling for impassioned musical recitals (*sama*) is delightful. Sometimes, so enraptured do some of these absorbed ecstasies become when under the influence of a state that they can hardly be regarded as belonging to this world at all.<sup>55</sup>

Those devotional institutions were usually dedicated to a particular *tariqa*, which focused on the techniques and wisdom of a founding *shaykh*. The descendant *shaykhs* were the “spiritual heirs of the founder” and were responsible for facilitating the rituals.<sup>56</sup>

A central component of *sama* was its pedagogical function. The *sama* session would begin after an act of group worship, such as prayer, quranic recitation, or the ritual

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<sup>55</sup> Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, quoted in J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 9-10.

<sup>56</sup> Trimingham, *Sufi Orders*, 10.

chanting of the names of God (*dhikr*). After the one among the Sufis with the “most sensitive voice” recited a stanza from a poem, the *shaykh* discussed its meaning with the disciples.

Following the teaching session, the singer (*qawwal*) began to sing entire Sufi poems. Often the singer was a youthful disciple who not only possessed a beautiful voice, but an appealing face as well. For some Sufi orders, the presence of a young boy represented the transcendent beauty of the Divine, which will be explored at greater length below. Additionally, accompanying instrumentation was not uncommon. The synergy of voice and music would compel the mystics to experience altered states, or ecstasy (*wajd*):

He who falls into ecstasy does not rise till he is overpowered, and the people do as he does. The dance is not to be affected or feigned, nay, their movements must be in accordance with the state, like one who is overcome by terror or unavoidable trepidation.<sup>57</sup>

During the exercise, the mystics received spiritual insight of the divine Essence and became aware of different realities. For some Sufi orders, body movements, or dance, were a result of the mystical experience, stimulated by the altered state. However, for other Sufi orders, such as the Mevlevi order of Jalal ad-Din Rumi, body movements were a way to induce ecstasy (*wajd*).

In order to calm the ecstatic mystics and return them to a state of normalcy, the singer sang in a lighter voice, allowing for a smooth transition out of the altered state. When the *sama* session ended, the mystics would return to their dwellings and contemplate in silence on their experience. It was also not uncommon for mystics to

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<sup>57</sup> J. Robson, ed., *Tracts on Listening to Music* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1938), 105.

refrain from food for several days after the session, “on account of the nourishment of their spirits and hearts with unseen mystical experiences (*waridat*).”<sup>58</sup>

### 2.3 Censures of *sama* from Non-Sufis

Ibn Abi al-Dunya (d. 894 CE/281 AH), in his *Dhamm al-Malahi (The Censure of Pastimes)*, deemed the activity at the heart of the ritual of *sama*, as the “amulet of fornication,” which “decreases shame, increases desire, and destroys manliness, and verily takes the place of wine and does what drunkenness does.”<sup>59</sup> Al-Dunya, referring to the act of singing, was certainly not alone in his opinion. Many non-Sufi legalists have forcefully railed against *sama*, considering the practice a threat to a Muslim’s sexual piety, forcing Sufi apologists to articulate the legitimacy of its practice. The legalists relied on nebulous quranic quotes and traditions (*hadith*) to express condemnation of *sama*. A particular quote often employed to suggest the illegality of listening to music declares: “Only those who are lost in error follow the poets. Do you not see how they rove aimlessly in every valley; how they say what they do not do?” (Q. 26:224-226). The legalists thus depended on a presumed correlation between poetry and singing, as the Quran neglects to specifically mention “music” or “singing.”

There were negative associations with music that roused opposition to its performance. Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1200 CE/597 AH), a prominent Hanbalite scholar, claimed that “between singing and fornication there is harmony from the perspective that singing

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<sup>58</sup> Robson, *Tracts*, 105.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

is the pleasures of the spirit, and fornication is the greatest of the pleasures of the flesh.”<sup>60</sup> Other Islamic jurists, including Abu Hanifa (d. 767/148 AH) and Malik Ibn Anas (d. 796 CE/179 AH), were also critical of music, considering its performance a mechanism for sexual arousal. For the non-Sufi legalists the ritual of *sama* suggested a potential element of “immorality.” While poetry occasionally escaped the invective of the *ulama*, accompanying music (vocal and/or instrumental) did not.<sup>61</sup> Music added to poetry intensified *sama* and, from the standpoint of the conservative jurist, possibly provoked a semblance to the courtly gatherings of that era which included the entertainment and availability of young boys and maidens.

Yet the criticisms of *sama* by the *ulama* were part of the larger doctrinal conflict between Sufism and orthodoxy. A doctrine that espoused “inwardness” to contemplate the Divine was certain to attract the diatribe of those who depended solely on Revelation and law (*sharia*). Thus the criticism of *sama* from the *ulama*, and the attempts at prohibiting music and poetry, may be rendered as “the greater attempt at stifling the spread of Sufi doctrine.”<sup>62</sup>

#### 2.4 Defense of *sama* from Sufis

Sufis, aware of the criticisms, sought to clarify the components of the *sama* ritual and restrict the practices that were occurring in some Sufi circles. Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri (d. 1072 CE/465 AH), in the *Risala (Treatise)*, prohibits the presence of ordinary believers at *sama* because of the “continued existence of their lower or carnal

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<sup>60</sup> Gribetz, “Sama Controversy,” 57.

<sup>61</sup> Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Quran* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2001), 35.

<sup>62</sup> Gribetz, “Sama Controversy,” 59.

natures (*nufusihim*),” indicating the potential to be sexually aroused by listening to music or poetry.<sup>63</sup> In the *Ihya*, Al-Ghazzali forbids the singing of poetry by a beardless youth, a practice to be developed further in the next chapter. He states the “fear of temptation” as the primary reason for the prohibition.<sup>64</sup> He also stipulates conditions for the attending novice, suspicious of remnants of the carnal love that has yet to be subdued. Al-Ghazzali, however, did allow for erotic descriptions, applicable to divine love, in poetry and song.

With regards to dancing, Ali b. Uthman al-Hujwiri (d. 1072 CE/465 AH), in the *Kashf al-Mahjub*, severely opposes the activity. He writes: “The person who calls it ‘dance’ is far from the right path, and even further away is the person who calls it a state which does not come involuntarily from God, (the listener) bringing that movement upon himself.”<sup>65</sup> He continues to explain the involuntary body movements stimulated by ecstasy are not only acceptable but encouraged, since they arrive from “the Truth.”<sup>66</sup> Al-Hujwiri therefore implies that the body movements aroused by *sama* are a result of the ineffable, while concentrated dance is the result of the carnal self which seeks sensual pleasure.

The underlying essence of these stipulations is that of unconditional excess. Indulgence in the practice of *sama*, if not properly conducted, was dangerous to the soul (*nafs*), and the continuation of Sufi practice in general. If the Sufi was not of a higher awareness, the potential for the corruption of the *nafs* was greater. One who solely enjoyed the pleasurable experiences of *sama* related to the body, achieved a sense of self-gratification in the sensual, and lust ensued. Thus the polemic against *sama* often

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<sup>63</sup> Avery, *Psychology*, 178.

<sup>64</sup> Al-Ghazzali, *Ihya*, quoted in Avery, *Psychology*, 179.

<sup>65</sup> Al-Hujwiri, *Kashf*, quoted in Avery, *Psychology*, 189.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 190

exhibited misjudgment of the ritual as a mere form of entertainment resulting in sensual arousal. To repel the criticisms and legitimize the practice, the Sufi authors relied on a necessary regulation of the practice.

### Chapter 3: The Physical Expression of Recited Verse

The poetry presented in this chapter was composed by four prominent Sufis of the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 CE/132-655 AH): Abu al-Husayn al-Nuri (d. 907 CE/295 AH), Abu Bakr al-Shibli (d. 946 CE/334 AH), Muhyiddin Ibn al-Arabi (d. 1240 CE/638 AH), and Umar Ibn al-Farid (d. 1235 CE/632 AH). Their poetry will serve as examples for how the homoerotic imagery reinforces the homosocial climate of the Sufi brotherhoods and manifests in the ritual of *sama*. Since the four mystics were veritably fond of the ritual of *sama*, their poetic works emphasize inferentially varying elements of the practice, including its cathartic effects, the experience of annihilation (*fana*), and the ensuing subsistence in God (*baqa*).

This chapter will address three delineated themes integral to Sufi poetry: 1.) passion (*ishq*), 2.) yearning, and 3.) oscillation between union and separation. While intimately related (and frequently overlapping), these themes will be approached as independent operating vehicles of expression for the Sufi objective: the momentary unitive experience with God. Homoerotic language of passion insinuated an intense love for the Divine; one that could be best articulated through the emotive power of carnal imagery. Language of yearning expressed reflective longing of the soul for the masculine Beloved, craving some sort of fulfillment that was often never obtained, but took pleasure even in deferred gratification. Union and separation were poles of experience in the Sufi fulfillment of the path (*tariqa*) and plunged the mystic into states of awareness and ignorance of the Divine.



### 3.1 Homoerotic Language of Passion

Sufi poets, by adapting the erotic ornamentation of previously established genres of pre- and early Islamic wine and love verse, expanded the concept of divine love observed in the Quran.<sup>67</sup> Yet, instead of expressing love for the Divine in terms related to quranic *mahabba* (Q. 20:39, 9:108), the poets gravitated toward the already-established trope of passion (*ishq*) to indicate a more ardent emotion and a more carnal expression.<sup>68</sup> Al-Nuri maintained that profane erotic poetry was an appropriate medium for the sublime experience and was probably the one who “introduced the word *ishq* into Sufism.”<sup>69</sup> The integration of *ishq* in mystical poetry scandalized conservative Muslim jurists, compelling condemnation of the topic. Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1200 CE/597 AH), a Hanbalite scholar, deemed *ishq* the love of the appetitive soul (*nafs shahwaniya*), which was prone to intoxication and sexual promiscuity.<sup>70</sup> In response, prominent Sufis, such as Ibn Sina (d. 1037 CE/428 AH) and Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (d. 1111 CE/505 AH), defended the *ishq* motif by attempting to reconcile it with mainstream doctrine. Al-Ghazzali emphasized that *ishq* denotes an excessive love that, when allocated appropriately, was most instrumental in disclosing emotion for the Divine.<sup>71</sup>

The theme of passionate love operates on several levels in Sufi poetry. Al-Nuri, in the following example, fuses homoeroticism and passion:

So passionate my love is, I do yearn  
to keep His memory constantly in mind:

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<sup>67</sup> For greater analysis on Sufi theories of divine love, see Binyamin Abrahamov, *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism: The Teachings of al-Ghazali and al-Dabbagh* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

<sup>68</sup> Wafer, “Vision and Passion,” 110.

<sup>69</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical*, 137.

<sup>70</sup> Joseph Normant Bell, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1979), 36.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

But O, the ecstasy with which I burn  
sears out my thoughts, and strikes my memory blind!  
And, marvel upon marvel, ecstasy  
itself is swept away; now far, now near  
my lover stands, and all the faculty  
of memory is swept up in hope and fear.<sup>72</sup>

By engaging masculine pronouns, al-Nuri conveys a channeling of his “passionate” love to the Divine, adverted to as his “lover.” The intense love for the Divine is so overwhelming that the very act of contemplation itself is voided, signifying his annihilation of self (*fana*). Avery writes, “This experiential reference to being overwhelmed also has a direct bearing on *sama* and the actions and behaviors which accompany it.”<sup>73</sup> The ecstasy (*wajd*) in the passage that “burns” and purifies his heart (*qalb*) was probably engendered by the aural stimulation of recitation in *sama*, of which al-Nuri was a notable enthusiast. The terms “hope” and “fear” correspond respectively to the states (*ahwal*) of contraction (*qabd*) and expansion (*bast*).<sup>74</sup> In the state (*hal*) of contraction, the soul of the mystic was compressed and swallowed in darkness, a condition of being “far” from God, inducing intense anxiety and depression. Yet it was out of this darkness that the light of unitive experience may have emerged. Expansion, referring to a state of being “near” God, resulted in the amplified self, or an extension of impassioned emotion, “a perfect joy and ease that may [have developed], in some cases, into true ‘cosmic consciousness,’ into the feeling of partaking of the life of everything created.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> A.J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London: Unwin Brothers, Ltd., 1956), 62-63.

<sup>73</sup> Avery, *Psychology*, 208.

<sup>74</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical*, 128.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

Moreover, the poem above attests to passionate love as a necessary propelling force to achieve altered states, such as *fana*, associated with *sama*. A lack of passion would deny the mystic access to the experience of *fana*. The power of passion to transcend all separation, even of lover and beloved, in union is transparent in the following stanza by Ibn al-Farid:

Passion annihilated  
the attributes here between us  
that had never abided there,  
so they passed away.<sup>76</sup>

The “attributes here between us” speak of the deceptive duality of human and God, which disappeared during the unitive experience. When the mystic was subsumed in the Divine, those “attributes” of separation disappeared. The Sufi’s intense passion, aroused by ritual performance of *sama*, nullified any sensation of separation implied by divine attributes and human ego self, and so they “passed away,” or annihilated in God (*fana fillah*).

In another verse from Ibn al-Farid, passion is implored, suggesting that the emotional influence of this fervent love is responsible for the inspiration of awe. The mystic begs God to inspire love without measure:

Give me excess of love and so increase me  
in marveling at Thee; and mercy have  
upon a heart for Thee by passion seared.  
And when I ask of Thee that I may see Thee  
even as Thou art, in Thy reality,  
say not: *Thou shalt not see*, but let me see.<sup>77</sup>

Pleading for immersion in love of the Divine, the author communicates the severity of his emotion, his heart inflamed by passionate desire. Because of his measureless love, the

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<sup>76</sup> Th. Emil Homerin, *Umar Ibn al-Farid: Sufi Verse, Sainly Life* (Mawlah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 55.

<sup>77</sup> Martin Lings, *Sufi Poems: A Mediaeval Anthology* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2004), 74.

Sufi is compelled to request an unveiling of the Divine “to see [God] as Thou art.” In that unveiling, the Sufi approached an awareness of truth, or the divine Reality (*al-Haqq*).

Passion as a poetic trope in Sufi verse taps several levels of resonance. Passion and its release into ecstasy, for many Sufis (and Muslims, in general), were undoubtedly forceful drives with uncertain consequences. In the following verse by Ibn al-Farid, passion is expressed through the use of allegory, with the Divine, personified as a butcher:

I said to a butcher: “I love you,  
but oh how you cut and kill me!”  
He said: “That’s my business,  
so you scold me?”

He bent to kiss my foot to win me,  
but he wanted my slaughter,  
so he breathed on me,  
to skin me.<sup>78</sup>

The homoerotic metaphor connotes a confrontation between the Sufi and God. In the poem, the mystic declares passionate love for a tempting butcher boy. The Divine as butcher, an impetus for enticement symbolized by the seducing kiss of the foot, exploits the mystic’s instinctive drive for carnal appeals.<sup>79</sup> However, instead of granting the kiss, the Butcher chooses to slay, or “skin,” him. A sense of passivity is relayed with the mystic surrendering to the will of the divine Butcher. God tempts the Sufi by granting those transient moments of intimacy, indicated by being “breathed on” in the poem, but pulls away, leaving the mystic desiring more.

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<sup>78</sup> Th. Emil Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Farid, His Verse, and His Shrine* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2001), 55.

<sup>79</sup> Homerin cites Ibn al-Farid’s grandson’s explanation for this homoerotic verse, in which he states his grandfather was exercising his technical expertise of double entendre (*tawriyah*). For him, Satan represented the butcher, who seduces the mystic from God. However, Jafar al-Udfuwi (d. 748/1347), a hagiographer, explains that the poem was the product of an “outpouring of [the author’s] effusive passion,” and that Ibn al-Farid symbolized God in the form of a butcher boy because he “loved absolute beauty in any form, human or otherwise.” See the chapter titled “Controversy” in Homerin, *From Arab Poet*.

For Sufis, the intrinsic, and thus inescapable, feeling of passion must be redirected from the flesh to God. Binyamin Abrahamov, in *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism*, clarifies the mystical adaptation of *ishq* and its implication:

The highest goal of the existence of the inborn *ishq* is to awaken man's soul from the slumber of negligence and folly and make the soul ascend from the material to the rational things, from the sensual to the spiritual entities which are its source.<sup>80</sup>

The mystic, therefore, embarked on the journey toward awareness using the model of profane love, which generated procreative union, and concluded with spiritual love, a union with the Divine. The transcendent intimacy that the Sufi acquired on the path to divine union was the fulfillment of a "sublimation of sexuality."<sup>81</sup>

Homoerotic language in poetry, then, conjures an image of the mystic's displacement of carnal passion into the male Beloved. While feminine traits were used seldom to describe the Divine, the poets were more inclined to describe God with masculine attributes. Considering the homosocial character of Sufi orders, the mystics regarded the male as the "general, ideal type of beauty," and the "masculine rather than the feminine form offered itself to the mystics of love as a symbol for the Godhead."<sup>82</sup>

Despite the homoerotic nature of much Sufi poetry, it would be a serious misnomer to designate the Sufi poets as "homosexuals." The penchant for the personification of masculine Beloved in mystical verse was rather the homoerotic "theological orientation," denotative of an "intimate expression of collectivity."<sup>83</sup> Sufi orders, like the rest of institutions in the Islamic world, were grounded in male-to-male

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<sup>80</sup> Abrahamov, *Divine Love*, 20.

<sup>81</sup> Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1985), 120.

<sup>82</sup> Hellmut Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World, and God in the Stories of Farid al-Din Attar*, trans. by John O'Kane (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), 457.

<sup>83</sup> Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, 20.

pedagogical procedures, dependent on intimate bonding of teacher and disciple. C.M. Naim, writing on pederastic inferences in mystical poetry, explains the expectation of the novice (*murid*) to love his master (*shaykh*): “A Sufi seeker should first direct all his love toward his mentor, who is always male; only later, through the help of the mentor, can he reach his true love, God, who is again always referred to in the masculine.”<sup>84</sup> The Sufi novice’s initial orientation in love toward the *shaykh* was an important step, and a sincere display of trust, in the effort to acquire the knowledge of *fana*-stimulating techniques (i.e. *sama*, *dhikr*, *khalwa*) associated with his particular brotherhood (*tariqa*).

The poetry of passion may be read as a metaphor for the preliminary dependency of *murid* upon *shaykh*, the first act in a long, arduous journey to the eventual union with God. The fervid Sufi was trained to divert the passion identified with the flesh to the Divine through ritual. For many Sufis, the practice of *sama* purged the erotic desires of the carnal soul (*nafs*) through a concentration and sublimation of those desires on the Divine. Abu Said Ibn Abi al-Khayr (d. 1049 CE/440 AH), a Persian mystic from Khurasan, stated that *sama* was “mainly a practical device to dissipate the lust” of the Sufis who might otherwise “find other, more dangerous ways of distraction.”<sup>85</sup> Thus the thematic infusion of passion and love in poetry essentially imitated the sublimation of sexuality in ritual.

Abbasid mystics who created significant bodies of love poetry redirected the language of human carnal love, which itself was not inherently disparaged, to the Divine, through remarkable expressions of poetic piety. The performance of Sufi poetry in the

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<sup>84</sup> C.M. Naim “The Theme of Homosexual (Pederastic) Love in pre-Modern Urdu Poetry” in *Studies of Urdu Gazal and Prose Fiction*, ed. Muhammad Umar Memon (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 123.

<sup>85</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical*, 244.

ritual of *sama* engendered in their auditors the emotional experience the poems describe. The metaphoric language of intense passion both expressed such performance and compelled the Sufis of various brotherhoods to apply their innate sexual energy to the higher spiritual goal of human intimacy with God, a prerequisite for divine Self-disclosure. Al-Ghazzali, in the *Ihya*, explained that the aim of recited verse and performed music in *sama* sessions was to “arouse longing for Him and passionate love towards Him, and to produce states in which He reveals Himself.”<sup>86</sup> The quintessential avenue of love to exhibit devotion to God is found in another verse by Ibn al-Farid:

While about my union  
a tradition has come,  
its transmission clear  
without doubt,

Declaring true love  
for those who draw near Him  
by willing devotions  
or those decreed.<sup>87</sup>

The mystic’s experience of union with God is validated by the word “tradition,” a term with authoritative resonance in Islam, second only to the Quran itself, referring as it does to the *hadith* of Prophet Muhammad (the first and greatest of the “friends of God”). For a *hadith* to be considered authoritative, it must come down through direct experiential witness to the Prophet’s words and deeds, which are understood as the believer’s guide to walking “the Straight Path” (Q.1:7) to God. In this first stanza of the poem, the mystic declares himself among the authentic transmitters of tradition (*hadith*), whose content is union and whose experience is “clear” and “without doubt.” Furthermore the tradition, “declaring true love for those who draw near Him,” suggests that not only is the mystic a

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<sup>86</sup> Gribetz, “Sama Controversy,” 51.

<sup>87</sup> Homerin, *Umar*, 27.

receiver and transmitter of authoritative tradition about his unitive mystical experience, but that God is the very author of that tradition in the form of *Hadith Qudsi*, a sub-genre of *hadith* where God speaks directly to the Prophet Muhammad outside of the context of revelation (the Quran). It is precisely this intimate, interpersonal communication between God and the mystic through which God “declare(s) true love for those who draw near Him.” The Sufi poet affirms that drawing near to God can be achieved equally by those who perform the supererogatory acts of Sufi piety, such as *dhikr* and *sama* (“willing devotions”), as well as those who adhere to obligatory pillars of practice (“those decreed”) and thus signals the all-encompassing nature of the divine Loving (*al-Wadud*).

### 3.3 Homoerotic Language of Yearning

Yearning in Sufi poetry promoted the notion of unfulfilled desire. Al-Nuri, in the verse below, proclaims the severity of his passionate longing:

Some have desired through hope to come to Thee.  
And Thou has wrought in them in their high design:  
Lo! I have severed every thought of me,  
And died to selfhood, that I might be Thine.  
How long, my heart’s Beloved? I am spent:  
I can no longer endure this banishment.<sup>88</sup>

The homoerotic nature of the poem is evident by al-Nuri’s reference to God as his “Beloved.” Furthermore, the mystic’s indication of being “spent” suggests the sensation of post-orgasmic delight, a feeling aroused from his temporary “union” with God. Yet the subsequent “banishment” produces anguish for the poet.<sup>89</sup> The vicariousness of al-Nuri’s

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<sup>88</sup> Arberry, *Sufism*, 63.

<sup>89</sup> Multiple accounts detail al-Nuri’s ecstatic experiences that resulted from *sama*. See the chapter titled “The Paradigmatic Experience of Two ‘Ecstatics,’ Nuri and Shibli,” in Avery, *Psychology*.



pain is relayed through the intensity of the language. The last line of the poem connotes al-Nuri's state of separation from God, producing emotional torture. Only after physical death can the feeling of fervid pining be remedied, providing the Sufi (and in this case, al-Nuri) with the permanent annihilation in the Beloved.

Ibn Arabi maintained that this inclination to yearn was preferable to the fulfillment, or union, as separation intensified the purity of love; and the yet-to-be-satisfied lover knew "the fiercest and most potent states of ardent desire, in themselves a kind of fulfillment."<sup>90</sup> Ibn Arabi metaphorically elaborates the profundity of such desire in the verse below:

Wet lips of the smile I love,  
nectar of the mouth I knew,

Pale moon apparition on the cheek  
veiled in the disarray of love.

If he had lowered his veil, he'd have  
put me to torture. He let it be.<sup>91</sup>

The homoerotic imagery is provocative in that it attempts to cause arousal. The poem redirects the passion away from the flesh, yet still binds essential desire to the mystic. "Nectar," or saliva, upon the beloved's lips is symbolic of the intoxicating effects of the Divine, which "leave a delicious taste in the heart," while the "veil" of the male beloved represents the necessitated mystery of the Divine.<sup>92</sup> In the poem, the beloved remains covered, since revealing himself would generate more suffering, on the part of the poet as lover, from constant desire. Ibn Arabi was indirectly referring to the *hadith* that states: "God hath seventy thousand veils of light and darkness; if He were to remove them, the

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<sup>90</sup> Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Scandal: Essays in Islamic Heresy* (New York: Autonomedia, Inc., 1987), 88.

<sup>91</sup> Sells, *Stations of Desire*, 128.

<sup>92</sup> Muhyiddin Ibn al-Arabi, *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq (The Interpreter of Desires)*, ed. and trans. by Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978), 99.

splendors of His face would consume all that His sight perceives.”<sup>93</sup> In the verse, Ibn Arabi acknowledges the strong desire to “see” God; yet he is aware that “seeing,” or an absolute “unveiling,” announced the end of the created universe, as the forms and substances, in which the presence of the Divine materializes, would perish. Ibn Arabi clarified that the whole of creation is a self-manifestation of the Divine, a mirror of divine reflection veiled by the tangible modes of Being. Thus, for Ibn Arabi, in order to “see” the Divine, one could contemplate the transcendent beauty of God through the physical form.<sup>94</sup>

Poetry of the Abbasid era was teeming with metaphoric references to the concept of meditating on the Divine through the human form. In the following verse by Ibn al-Farid, the beauty of the Prophet is expounded with homoerotic imagery:

To him when he is manifest and face to face  
every full moon and every lesser form do lean.  
His virtues are perfections: had he given his light  
to the full moon, it never would have been eclipsed.  
Said I, “all love for thee is in me,” he would say:  
“Loveliness is mine; the whole of beauty is in me.”  
For all the art of those who would describe his beauty,  
time shall run out, and never he be fully described.<sup>95</sup>

The Prophet Muhammad’s attributes are described as “perfections” because of his mysterious manifestation of the light of God. Many Sufis claimed that the light of Muhammad was the primordial essence, imparted by the Divine, which illuminated all of existence, including humankind. And because his “beauty” was an emanation of God, he was an embodiment of the true Beauty. Ibn al-Farid, in the poem, offers an interpretation

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<sup>93</sup> Ibn al-Arabi, *Tarjuman*, 99.

<sup>94</sup> Ritter, *The Ocean*, 492.

<sup>95</sup> Lings, *Sufi Poems*, 76.

of the Prophet's physical form as a window, or witness (*shahid*), to envision the divine Reality (*al-Haqq*).

The realization of divine Oneness (*Tawhid*) allowed the Sufi, ideally, to discover beauty in all of God's created forms. Ayn al-Qudat (d. 1131 CE/525 AH), a notable Persian mystic, maintained that the corporeal objects of passionate love are "veils of God's absolute beauty which serve the purpose of making the lover's eye accustomed to splendor of beauty so that he may endure encountering God."<sup>96</sup> For many Sufis, and particularly those influenced by Ibn Arabi's complex system of contemplating the physical form to discover the Divine, all occasions of beauty in nature were reflections of God's beauty. Yet the most perfect reflection, or *shahid*, of Beauty was the human male, as Sufis understood the creation of the first human, Adam, as a form of divine self-reflection. In the *Risala (Treatise)* of Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri (d. 1072 CE/465 AH), the definition of *shahid*, in relation to the potent emotion of love, is detailed:

What is present in your heart is your *shahid*...And when someone has attached his heart to a person, it is said: 'This is his *shahid*,' i.e. the person is present in his heart. For indeed love has the effect that the lover continually thinks of the beloved and the beloved occupies his heart completely.<sup>97</sup>

The concept of love in Sufism was predicated on the impression that the emotion directed to the beloved was channeled indirectly to a sublime source. Thus, the love language of mystical poetry denoted that "every lover in reality love[d] in his or her beloved the beauty of God."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ritter, *The Ocean*, 451-452.

<sup>97</sup> Al-Qushayri, *Risala*, quoted in Ritter, *The Ocean*, 485. Al-Qushayri, describing the origin of *shahid*, writes: "*Shahid* comes from *shahada*, bearing witness."

<sup>98</sup> Ritter, 492

Contemplating the essence of God through created form, especially the human male, was a controversial element of the symbolic trope of lover yearning for beloved. The Sufi tradition of “gazing at beardless boys” (*nazar ila al-murd*) was a method to contemplate, and long for, the divine Beauty through human form, an idea often incorporated into *sama*.<sup>99</sup> The youth at the center of the ritual served as the *shahid* to the transcendent Beauty, outraging religious authorities (*ulama*), because of its potential affinity with incarnationism (*hulul*), a particularly damaging charge.<sup>100</sup>

Yet Sufis clarified that the *shahid* of *sama* was not a direct manifestation of divine substance, but he performed as a mirror that reflected the manifestation of divine beauty in creation. The youth was not only regarded because of his attractive physical appearance, but because of the “metaphysical purity” inherent in his youthfulness.<sup>101</sup> His unbeardedness (*amrad*) was denotative of physical and moral purity, a lack of corruption by post-puberty sexuality. Contemplating the beauty of the young boy designated the “interior image of an absent object which through the image appear[ed] to be present.”<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, by gazing at the boy, there was the expectation upon the Sufi to redirect his carnal passions to the divine Beauty inherent in the *shahid*. By doing so, the Sufi successfully sublimates his sexual self, and the beardless boy acts as a “witness” to the disappearance of the carnal soul.<sup>103</sup> The *shahid*, then, was that which caused the mystic to see as a witness what was absent from him: the Divine.

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<sup>99</sup> In demonstrating the sanction of *nazar*, Sufis rely on a popular, and debatable, *hadith* that explains the Prophet, during a dream, beheld God in the form of a beardless youth. For the main forms of this *hadith*, see the chapter titled “Religious Love of a Beautiful Person” in Ritter, *The Ocean*.

<sup>100</sup> For greater clarification on the polemic against *nazar*, see the chapter titled “Selection and Organization of Literary Material: Ibn al-Jawzi’s *Dhamm al-hawa*” in Bell, *Love Theory*.

<sup>101</sup> Wilson, *Scandal*, 106.

<sup>102</sup> Ritter, *The Ocean*, 484.

<sup>103</sup> Al-Qushayri, in the *Risala*, writes: “If he looks at a beautiful person, and in doing so his humanity has dropped from him, and looking at the person doesn’t distract him from the mystical state he is in, and

The beauty of the boy as a meditative focus in *sama* exposed the true Beauty veiled in all of creation. In that exposure, passion would be kindled within the heart, perpetually yearning for a sense of fulfillment. Ibn al-Farid expresses the underlying coupling of beauty and love in the verse below:

Alone with my Beloved I have been:  
A secret subtler than wind's lightest breath,  
when on the night it steals, between us passed;  
He granted to my gaze a longed for sight,  
whence I, till then unknown, illustrious am.  
Between His Beauty and His Majesty  
I marveled, and my state of marveling  
was like an eloquent tongue that spake of me.<sup>104</sup>

The author of the poem, like the Sufi in *sama*, “marvels” at the much desired “sight,” thus regarding the male’s beauty as a distant abstraction to be unveiled, discovered, longed for, and appreciated, but not to be truly realized in this life. Experiential moments, such as *fana*, may have allowed for a temporary experience of union with God; however, those experiences, like the contemplation of the divine Beauty in human form, served as mere glimpses to the eventual destination, or the final *fana*.

The intensity of confronting the manifested Beauty is evident in another verse by Ibn al-Farid:

A sword his eyelids draw against my heart, and I see the  
very languor thereof doth whet its blade;  
All the more sheds he suddenly our blood, picturing them  
that Musawir slew among the Beni Yazdadh.  
No wonder is it, that he should have taken the hairs upon  
his cheeks to be the suspender-thongs of his sword, seeing  
that he is ever smiting and slaying therewith...  
The sun’s self, yea, and the graceful gazelle submit humbly  
before his face as he gazes about him, and take refuge  
and shelter his beauty...The harshness of his

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being with him exerts no form of influence (of a sensual kind) on him, then the *shahid* bear witness on his behalf that the carnal soul has disappeared,” quoted in Ritter, *The Ocean*, 485.

<sup>104</sup> Lings, *Sufi Poems*, p. 74-76.

heart rivals the tempered steel.  
 The mole upon his cheek embraces in its conflagration what  
 man soever is passionately occupied with him, and scorneth  
 to seek deliverance.  
 Ice-cool are his red lips, and sweet his mouth to kiss  
 in the morning, yea, even before the toothpick's  
 cleansing excelling the musk in fragrance and investing it  
 with its own perfume.  
 Of his mouth and his glances cometh my intoxication; nay,  
 but I see a vintner in his every limb.<sup>105</sup>

The language of yearning in this verse is especially allegorical. Ibn al-Farid expresses longing for his beloved through a series of detailed expositions on his beauty and this application of double entendre (*tawriyah*) proves a skillful command of poetic expression, allowing the poem to function on multiple levels.<sup>106</sup> The imagery, replete with homoerotic metaphors of the magnificent nature of the Divine, is expounded ornately, evoking sentiments of fear and awe. The sword represents the heart-piercing capability of the Divine; a simple glance from the Beloved is endowed with fatal power (“All the more sheds he suddenly our blood”). The gazelle is emblematic of the once-untamed soul (*nafs*) that now, because of being tamed by divine love, “submits” to Beauty. While the cheek corresponds to the visible beauty of the Divine in created form, the mole on the cheek is the point from which Beauty radiates, with Oneness concealed by the black tint of its mark. At the end of the quotation, Ibn al-Farid illustrates the intoxicating proclivity of the Beloved's beauty to engender ecstasy (*wajd*), a sense of acquiescence to the Loving (*al-Wadud*).

In the *sama* ritual, the images of the divine Beauty enclosed in poetry were componential to arousing altered states. If the presence of a *shahid* was involved, he

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<sup>105</sup> Wafer, “Vision and Passion,” 116.

<sup>106</sup> For greater analysis on *tawriyah*, and its function in Arabic literature, see S.A. Bonebakker, *Some Early Definitions of the Tawriya and Safadi's Fadd al-Xitam an at-Tawriya wa'l-Istixdam* (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1966).

compelled the mystic, like the gazelle in Ibn al-Farid's verse, to submit to his beauty, commanding the mystic to quell his desiring soul (*nafs*) in order to contemplate the true Beauty. By yearning for the beauty of the boy (i.e. his purity and youthfulness), the mystic indirectly yearned for the divine Beauty. The boy, untouched by sexuality, provided an oasis of metaphysical purity, and thus allowed the mystic to experience his own purity, which had been tainted by age. At the root of the *nazar* practice in *sama*, then, was the purification of yearning that carried the mystic closer to the climax of his path (*tariqa*), to union with God.

#### 3.4 Homoerotic Language of Union and Separation

Oscillation between union and separation was another medium for Sufi poetic expression. The momentary unitive experience that the mystic experienced in *sama* compelled the desire for more encounters. Within the Sufi, that yearning increased through repeated attempts at *fana*. Poetry that elaborated, implicitly or explicitly, the dichotomy of union and separation varied considerably, depending on the Sufi's idiosyncratic response to the experience. For some Sufis, the fleeting moment of self annihilation produced a sense of contentment, which resided in the comforting notion of eventual permanent union (i.e. death). For others, however, suffering ensued from an intense encounter too short-lived and impossible to sustain, thus forcing the mystic to lament separation. Sufis of the former mode often relayed a sense of confidence that the Divine was always present, though awareness was not, while the imagery of the latter

frequently incorporated an aura of intensity, propounding verses with images of burning passion and fire, and, in some instances, wishing for death.

Al-Nuri was one of the mystics who tended to mourn the seeming unending separation between himself and the Beloved. His despondency can be inferred in the following verse:

I supposed that, having passed away  
From self in concentration, I should blaze  
A path to Thee: but ah! No creature may  
Draw nigh Thee, save on Thy appointed ways.  
I cannot longer live, Lord, without Thee;  
Thy hand is everywhere: I may not flee.<sup>107</sup>

In the poem, the author is alluding to those transient moments of *fana* (“having passed away from self”), which were apparently too brief. The Divine possesses the initiatory power to bestow the varying states (*ahwal*) upon the mystic (“Thy appointed ways”), who has surpassed the stations (*maqamat*) of the *tariqa*. Therefore, the moments were not only brief, but unexpected, compelling al-Nuri to lament “no creature may draw nigh Thee.” For the mystic, God, too transcendent to be relished entirely, was not accessible beyond shortened experiences of *fana*. The passion, then, that fueled al-Nuri’s longing for the Divine elicited a reaction of favored death (“I cannot longer live”).

In an excerpt from Ibn Arabi, the passion arising from separation is expressed in explicitly homoerotic language:

From drunkenness, reason,  
longing, the wound of love,  
from tears, my eyelids,  
the fire, my heart:

He whom you desire  
is between your ribs,

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<sup>107</sup> Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi, *Kitab al-Ta’arruf li-Madhab ahl al-Tasawwuf (The Doctrine of the Sufis)*, trans.by A.J. Arberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 100.



turned side to side  
in the heat of your sigh.

I told them tell him  
he's the one  
who kindled the fire  
blazing in my heart.

It is extinguished only  
in our coming together. If  
it burns out of control,  
who can be blamed for loving?<sup>108</sup>

Ibn Arabi challenges the auditor to decipher the poem's metaphoric images ornamenting its form (*surah*) to reveal its true meaning (*mana*). The sensations of "drunkenness," "reason," "longing," and "love" represent the varying states (*ahwal*) imparted by God. The reference to "between your ribs" indicates the heart (*qalb*), or the seat of consciousness. For Ibn Arabi, awareness of the Divine was dependent on the purified heart, the "throne where the final unveiling takes place."<sup>109</sup> In the poem, the mystic is informed of his beloved's presence in his heart. The Divine, symbolized as Ibn Arabi's masculine beloved, is responsible for engendering the passionate "fire blazing in [his] heart." The ignited fire of desire affixed to his heart will only be extinguished through a final annihilation of self, a symbolic consummation with his pursuit. If that does not occur, the fire will continue and his yearning will only intensify.

The image of fire in Sufi poetry was emblematic of purified passion. The "kindled fire" signified its capacity to cleanse and purge the heart by channeling passionate love (*ishq*) to the Divine, and the ritual of *sama* enriched the heart by igniting a purifying flame within it. Through the process of cleansing the heart, *sama* allowed the mystic to

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<sup>108</sup> Sells, *Stations of Desire*, 132.

<sup>109</sup> James Winston Morris, "The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn Arabi and the Miraj, Part 1," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 107:4, 1987, 630.

receive revelation and experience divine realities. Al-Ghazzali states, “*sama*...is what strengthens one’s passion and love, and it inflames the kindling of one’s heart, bringing forth from it states (*ahwal*) of revelations.”<sup>110</sup> For the Sufi, the heart was bound to the emotional deluge aroused during *sama*. Thus, *sama* was an essential force in the Sufi quest for spiritual insight by allowing the heart to be purged of wanton desires, effectuating “the secrets of the divine realm.”<sup>111</sup>

Al-Shibli, using homoerotic language, poeticizes the burning passion ignited by an experience of *fana* and expresses a sense of optimism:

He looked on me, then let me see  
the wonders of His care for me.  
On fire I was, which made my heart  
melt, when His Presence drew apart.  
Yet absent He is not, that I might take  
to memory for consolation’s sake,  
nor turned away, that I might absent be.<sup>112</sup>

Al-Shibli understands that God, not the mystic, initiates the transforming and provocative gaze (“He looked on me”). The unveiling of the Divine subsumes the mystic, causing a fire within his heart. In this verse, however, the loss of awareness is not lamented. The mystic receives “consolation” in the memory of the encounter, recognizing that separation from the Divine is a mere illusion resulting from the realm of multiplicity.

The sense of comfort elicited from the encounter corresponds to the state of subsistence in God (*baqa*). After the experience of annihilation in the Divine, the mystic became more aware of “himself in the ‘life of God,’ when all his attributes, transformed

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<sup>110</sup> Al-Ghazzali, *Ihya*, quoted in Avery, *Psychology*, 82.

<sup>111</sup> Avery, *Psychology*, 82.

<sup>112</sup> Lings, *Sufi Poems*, 42.

and spiritualized, [were] restored to him.”<sup>113</sup> That state of remaining in God allowed the mystic to concentrate all aspects of his life, including love and desire, on the Divine.

Ibn al-Farid, in the poem below, discerns the presence of God in his surroundings, implicitly acknowledging that distance is illusory:

Though he be absent from me  
Every grasping sense sees him  
In every subtle sense,  
Lovely and pure:

In the melody  
Of the lyre and gentle flute  
When they embrace  
In trilling notes of song,

In the meadows  
Of the forest gazelle  
In twilight’s cool  
And daylight’s glow,

Where the mist  
Falls from clouds  
On a blossoming carpet  
Woven by flowers,

Where the zephyr  
Sweeps its skirts,  
Guiding to me at dawn  
The sweetest scent,

And in my kissing  
the cup’s lip,  
Sipping wine drops  
In pure pleasure.

I never knew exile  
While he was with me,  
And wherever we were  
My mind was at quiet rest.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical*, 59.

<sup>114</sup> Homerin, *Umar*, 15.

In the beginning of the verse, the author remarks on the absence of his lover. Yet in his “senses,” he literally “sees” his male lover, a homoerotic metaphor referring to the presence of God everywhere. He indicates that he experiences the Divine while listening (*sama*) to a “melody,” while seeing the “meadows of the forest gazelle,” while smelling “flowers” carried by the wind, and while tasting “wine drops.” At the end of the poem, Ibn al-Farid proclaims that his mind “was at quiet rest” knowing his lover, or God, was with him, implying the realization that the “absence,” or separation, mentioned at the beginning was a deception.

For many Sufis, that awareness of the Divine in all creation was the climactic moment on the *tariqa*. Indeed, the consistency of that awareness was difficult to maintain, as evinced by the expressions of overwhelming grief in the poetry. Those moments of “separation” compelled the techniques, such as *sama*, to yield moments of “union,” or recognition of the Divine through self annihilation (*fana*). While the Sufi interpreted the states of *fana* and *baqa* as being bestowed by God, his advanced status on the *tariqa* was critical in determining the legitimacy of his experiences. Thus the mystic experienced life as a pendulum, vacillating between moments of “union” and “separation.”

## Conclusion

Homoeroticism in Abbasid Sufi poetry was not, as stated earlier, denotative of an orientation to homosexual behavior, but an outcome of the homosocial quality of Sufi brotherhoods. By concentrating on the works of the poets and other Sufi authorities written during the Abbasid Caliphate, it is possible to perceive how the homosocial interactions impacted literature and ritual life in classical Sufism. Considering the strict sex segregation of Islamic society during the Abbasid era, in which men dominated the public sphere and women the domestic, Sufi orders were framed by male-to-male interactions at multiple strata, ranging from mundane occasions, such as dining and working together, to more spiritual matters, such as engaging in ritual expressions of devotion. Bonding between men in the Sufi brotherhoods required a remarkable degree of intimacy, as the mystical knowledge of the path (*tariqa*) was imparted among small circles of masters (*shaykh*) and disciples (*murid*). Sufi disciples depended on the wisdom of their master, who was the instrumental force in their desire to fulfill the requirements of the *tariqa*. The homoerotic imagery of Sufi poetry was thus a natural development from a society influenced by an implied understanding of maleness as the normative ideal.

The predominance of maleness profoundly impacted the methods of expressing the Divine, especially in poetry. The representation of the male as the apotheosis of beauty and of spiritual achievement was constantly affirmed through the portrayal of the masculine God in Sufi verse. Poetry that emphasized the beauty of the Prophet, or of an unobtainable male beloved, was an intermediate correspondence to the sublime beauty of

the Divine. Homoerotic language, then, affirmed that “Medieval Islamic men controlled not only access to God, society, and culture, but also sexuality.”<sup>115</sup>

Sufi poets, amplifying the divine love articulated in the Quran and *hadith*, channeled the language of passion (*ishq*) to God, signifying a pure intent. Since desires of the flesh were distractions that diverted the Sufi from the path (*tariqa*), the mystic was expected to redirect those temptations to the Divine. Sexuality, for the Sufi, began with profane love, associated with the carnal desires of adolescence early adult life, and ended with spiritual love, a sense of total fidelity to God. However, the median between the two love extremes transpired in the Sufi brotherhoods.

The use of specifically homoerotic images, conveyed through the recurring tropes of passion, love, and yearning, were suggestive of sublimated sexuality within that homosocial context. On the microcosmic scale, love themes in poetry manifested in the intimate relationship between Sufi master and disciple. Since the aspiring disciple required the master to obtain the spiritual knowledge of the *tariqa*, he was expected to surrender himself to the will of his teacher. Through the complete devotion of love to the master, the disciple transitioned from “spiritual powerlessness to spiritual maturity and authority.”<sup>116</sup> The successful surrender to the master by the disciple led to the awareness of God, thus reenacting what occurs on the macrocosmic scale: the surrender to the Divine.

The longing for, attaching to, and contemplation of the master allowed the Sufi disciple to eventually become entirely annihilated in the Divine (*fana*). In the same way

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<sup>115</sup> Steven Oberhelman, “Hierarchies of Gender, Ideology, and Power,” in *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, eds. J.W. Wright and Everett K. Rowson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 67.

<sup>116</sup> Margaret Malamud, “Gender and Spiritual Self-Fashioning: The Master-Disciple Relationship in Classical Sufism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 64:1, 1996, 94.

that love and devotion to the master could produce a loss of self, “so too [could] love of God lead to loss of self and the replacement of human attributes with divine ones.”<sup>117</sup> Homoerotic metaphors of love and yearning for the beloved reflected the necessitated admission of powerlessness in order to obtain God. In the poetry, the Sufi longing for his beloved was helplessly impassioned. The loss of control engendered by that passion was indicative of passivity to his beloved, who was symbolically linked with the Divine.

Passivity to God was further implied in the bestowment of states (*ahwal*) upon the Sufi. While the stations of the path were accessible by effort through self-discipline, states were dependent upon the will of the Divine. However, by engaging in specific ritual practices, the Sufi would be more susceptible to achieving the varied states. The ritual of *sama* was widely accepted across the Sufi orders of the Abbasid period as a method for achieving realization of God. Despite the multifaceted nature of Sufism, the goal of *sama* was uniform: union with the God through annihilation of selfhood (*fana*). And the singing of poetry directly stimulated the altered state experiences that were indicated by ecstasy (*wajd*).

Participation in *sama* actualized the content of poetry through song. Whether it was a reference to the metaphoric passionate (*ishq*) love for God emotional or the intensified yearning for a beloved, the thematic elements were enlivened by the ritual’s capacity to manifest those meanings. By sublimating homoerotic themes, the poets discussed in this analysis were also reflecting the sublimation of sexuality among a confraternity of men in Sufi ritual. Since sexuality was the source of existence, it evinced the inherent unity in creation, making the quest for God available.

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<sup>117</sup> Malamud, “Gender,” 99.

It was the responsibility of the Sufi to quell the desiring soul (*nafs*) and to transcend from carnal love to divine love. The Sufi's level of comprehension of the poem's meaning mirrored his ability to surrender to the annihilation of self in God (*fana*). Patrick Laude, expressing the significance of inner meaning (*mana*) in verse, states, "A true poem is one in which a profound spiritual intuition manifests itself in the perfect clothing of a prosodic gem."<sup>118</sup> That "profound spiritual intuition" enabled the mystic to experience the momentary unitive experience with the Divine.

Thus the Sufi was required to recognize the themes of passion and desire as metaphors for the heart's (*qalb*) desire for oneness with the Divine. When listening to homoerotic poetry in *sama*, the mystic was expected not to merely ignore the carnality of the verse, but to become immersed in the language, capture the true inner meaning (*mana*) of the poem, and transport the passionate restraints of the earthly domain to the Divine. In that respect, through *sama* and passionate love poetry, mystical love was continuity from the ephemeral to the spiritual. Poetry, pointing to the ontological presence of God via the auditory vibrations of verse, elevated the mystic through the transcending levels of awareness, and into the Divine.

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<sup>118</sup> Laude, *Singing the Way*, 52.



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