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50. Strictly speaking, mōndō and kōan should be distinguished as two different genres, but for a first approximation, we can consider them together.

51. Notice the difference between the "progressive," textual dialogues of early Chan and the "disruptive" dialogues of "classical" Chan.

52. Concerning this notion, see François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thaï, Baud, Just Gaming (Minneapolis, 1985).

53. On this question, see Austin, How to Do Things with Words. See also "Performative Utterances," in Paul Edwards, ed., The Encyclopedia of Philosophy (New York, 1967), vol. 5-6, pp. 90-91; Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Événement, Contexte," in Marges de la philosophie (Paris, 1972), pp. 382-84; and Paul de Man, Allegories of Reading (New Haven, Conn., 1979), pp. 119-32. Notice, however, that, contrary to Austin's definition, Chan "speech-acts" are polysemic, irreducible to a single meaning, and do not imply a self-controlled intentionality.


56. In a round-table discussion on Chan, Nishitani Koji stated, for example, that these encounters, "different from the dialogues that take place in schools or elsewhere, . . . were direct body attacks," while his interlocutor, Shihbyama Zenkei, compared them to situations in which "two swordsman fighting with real swords" (Eastern Buddhist 8 [1975]: 70).


60. Rabelais, Histoires de Gargantua et Pantagruel, pp. 235-36, 237, 239.


8

Mystical Language and the Teaching Context in the Early Lexicons of Sufism

CARL W. ERNST

How does mystical language differ from other types of language? If one wishes to answer this question without relying on a priori definitions of mysticism, it would seem desirable to inquire how mystics have described their attitude toward language in general, and how they distinguish the characteristics of the special terminology and modes of discourse used in mystical writing. The literature of Islamic mysticism features a subgenre that is particularly appropriate for such an inquiry: lexicons of the technical terminology of the Sufis. The Sufi lexicons have the appearance of the standard academic dictionaries that proliferated in all the fields of Arab-Islamic scholarship, yet the Sufis distinguished themselves from other lexicographers by consistently referring their technical terms to a manifold range of mystical experiences. Most of the early Sufi lexicons, written between the tenth and thirteenth centuries C.E., are designed for novices in the Sufi path, and amount to maps of the internal topography of Sufism. The mystical language of the Sufi lexicons expresses a wide range of experiences, not propositions, and it presupposes the authority of the master-disciple relationship as the basis for the intended experiences of transcendence.
It is the special context of this teaching relationship that gives these Sufi lexicons importance for the concept of mystical language.

The construction of dictionaries was an activity that scholars of the Arab-Islamic world pursued diligently, to a degree rivaled perhaps only by the Chinese before modern times. As an independent discipline, lexicography emerged slowly from the study of the Qur'an, as an attempt to deepen the understanding of the sacred book. Arabic philological scholarship proceeded along the lines of the science of hadith, which studies the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad; transmitters of definitions, like hadith-transmitters, had to pass scrutiny of their ethical and religious character to gain full acceptance. Dictionaries were arranged in a number of ways, sometimes by subject or by a variety of alphabetical orders. A general dictionary such as the famous Majmū‘ al-‘Ulūm (Keys of the Sciences) of al-Khwārazmī (ca. 977) attempted to cover the terminology of both the traditional Islamic sciences and the intellectual sciences inherited from the Hellenistic world; this eclectic reference work was perfectly suited to the literary culture of government secretaries in the late ‘Abbasid period. The vast multivolume Arabic dictionaries of Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1311) and al-Zahhāq (d. 1701) were models of literary scholarship, and used abundant specimes of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry as testimonies (shāhādāt) to the usage of various words. While the study of the Arabic language thus enlarged its scope by absorbing secular literature, philology was never entirely separate from religious concerns; doctrinal considerations often precluded the conclusions that literary scholarship might have reached on its own, since the Qur'an could never be considered on the level of ordinary writings.

Sufi lexicons first appeared as appendices to the Arabic treatises on Sufism written in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 988) included a chapter with definitions of 155 terms in his Kitāb al-Limā‘ fi ‘l-taṣawwuf (Book of Glimmerings on Sufism). Substantially the same list of terms, with significant development of the definitions, appeared two centuries later in the Persian work of Rūzbihān Baḡšī (d. 1209), the Sharḥ al-Majhūl (Commentary on Ecstatic Sayings). Briefer lexicons were included in the Rūṣāfah (Epistle) of Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1074) and the Persian Kashf al-Majhūb (Revelation of the Veiled) of ‘Alī b. Ḥujwīrī (d. 1072). Of special interest are two dictionaries by the great Sufi master Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibhār (‘Arabī) (d. 1324), one a separate treatise written in 1218 and the other a section in his encyclopedic Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyāt (Spiritual Conquests of Mecca). These texts are some of the most significant early Sufi lexical works, later works, such as the compendious Sufi dictionary of ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāṣhānī (discussed below), adopted a different focus and arrangement to reach a wider audience, but in the process they departed from the original orientation toward Sufi novices. In more recent times, the publication of broadly aimed dictionaries with significant amounts of Sufi terminology has continued, particularly in Persian.

European scholars have devoted relatively little attention to the Sufi lexicons, though two of the earliest works of nineteenth-century scholarship on Sufism highlighted this genre. Tholuck cited excerpts from Kāshānī’s dictionary in 1828, and Aloys Sprenger published Kāshānī’s complete text in 1845. Ibn ‘Arabī’s separate lexicon, the Aḥkām al-Suḥayyib, was the first of his writings to be published in Europe, appearing in 1845 in an edition by Gustavus Flügel along with the general dictionary of Islamic subjects by Jāmī (d. 1299). These early efforts, however, did not inspire much further interest in the vocabulary and semantics of Sufism. Indeed, Sprenger called Sufi mysticism a “monomania” and a “dis-ease” characteristic of civilizational decadence, though he conceded the importance of Sufism in poetry, “because the noblest feelings of man are morbibly exalted in this disease.” Reinhold Dozy, author of the Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes, spoke contemptuously of the recondite language of Sufism, observing, “I think that I would lose my mind if I submerged myself in the study of certain types of these words, in the alembical terminology of the Sufis, for example. This is a task that I voluntarily leave to others.” The principal work on Sufism that might have been expected to deal with the Sufi lexicons was the epochal study by Louis Mas- sognon, Essai sur les origines due lexique technique de la mystique musulmane. Massognon, despite his wide-ranging comments in this work, intended it to be specifically a study of the vocabulary of al-Hallīj, the Sufi martyr who exerted a consuming fascination over Massognon’s studies. The early lexicons of Sufism, he ob-
erved, could be profitably compared with the terms used by al-Hājī, līj, but Maḥṣūn also left this inquiry to others. This essay is a brief survey of the early Sufi lexicons, with special reference to their explicit presentation of language as the expression of mystical experiences.

What was the purpose of a Sufi lexicon? As the authors of these texts explain, a lexicon is only necessary for a subject when a specialized technical vocabulary comes into existence, which only experts in that field properly understand. Unlike Khwārzamī's dictionary, however, the Sufi lexicons were not typically designed to assist outsiders to comprehend their vocabulary. On the contrary, the special terminology of Sufism was partially designed to conceal meanings from outsiders who were not qualified to understand them. The Sufi authors expound on this exclusive aspect of their terminology in the prefatory remarks to the lexicons. Qushaynī observes,

Know, regarding the sciences, that every group among the scholar- ary has words they employ on matters they share, by which they are distinguished from others, and they agree in this for the sake of their common goal: increasing understanding for those who discuss, or facilitating for the people of this art the comprehen-
sion of their meanings without restriction. This group [i.e., the Sufi] employs words on matters they share, through which they intend to reveal their meanings to themselves, and to summarize and conceal from those who oppose them in their path [jarīfī], so that the meanings of their words may be obscure to outsiders, out of jealousy toward them for their secrets. Thus they form a party against those who are unworthy. . . . By the commentary on these words we wish to facilitate the understanding of those among the wayfarers of these paths and the followers of their example [wājīdī] who wish to comprehend their meanings.\] So the vocabulary of Sufism is designed both to facilitate under-
standing among Sufis and to frustrate it for outsiders. It should not be surprising that some Muslim scholars, such as the Hanbali jurist Ibn al-Jawzī, therefore severely criticized Qushaynī's Sufi ter-
minology as a reprehensible innovation.44 Hujjāwī is equally firm in maintaining the two functions of the mystical vocabulary, though he underlines the utility of the Sufi terminology as being more for novices than adepts:

Know (may God make you happy) that the people of every art and the masters of every activity have expressions with each other in the issuing of their secrets, and words the meaning of which none knows but themselves. The purpose of setting up express-
sions is twofold: one is better instruction and simplification of intricacies to approximate the understanding of the aspirant, and the other is concealing the secret from those who are not worthy of that knowledge. The proofs of that are clear, for the philolo-
gists are distinguished by their own set expressions, such as "past tense," "future," "correct," etc.; examples are given from jurists, hadith scholars, and theologians. . . . Now this group also has set words to conceal and display their speech, so that they may act accordingly in their path; they show what they wish and hide what they wish.\] The terms of Sufism, then, are explicitly intended both to conceal and to display, to show and to hide. It might be supposed that secretive "jealousy" of the Sufis (in Qushaynī's phrase) is not altogether different from the professional egotism that leads to jargon in every field. The Sufis have a different reasoning, how-
ever; their theory of meaning insists that the mystical language is esoteric in its essence, as we shall see.

It may not be easy to draw the line between novices who can benefit from having technical terms defined and outsiders who should be prevented from learning the Sufi vocabulary. The differ-
ence between Ibn 'Arabī's two lexicons illustrates this difficulty; the lexicon in the Futūḥāt occurs in the middle of an esoteric discus-
sion of different types of divine knowledge, and it is aimed at the reader who has a deep acquaintance with Sufi teachings. This lex-
icon has the unusual feature, moreover, of chaining all the terms together so that the conclusion of each definition includes the next term, in this way introducing the next term's definition. This lin-
kage of terms is certainly no accident; it suggests that they share an essential relationship beyond their purely lexical connotations.45

The ingenious structuring of Ibn 'Arabī's lexicon is based on the simultaneously experiential and transcendental nature of the Sufi vocabulary, as discussed below. It is, in addition, expressed in a teaching formula ("If you say . . . then we say") characteristic of the Islamic religious sciences. Ibn 'Arabī's lexicon by these formal characteristics perfectly illustrates the intentionality of mystical
language in the teaching relationship. Ibn ‘Arabi noticed the difficulty of the conventional scholars when he replied to the request of the unnamed friend who inspired the Sufi lexicon:

You asked me to explain the words that the Sufi mystics, God’s people, circulate among themselves, when you saw many of the conventional scholars ask us about the meaning of our writings, and the writings of the people of our path, despite their lack of knowledge about the words which we have agreed upon, by which we understand one another. Just so is the custom of the people of every art among the sciences. So I answered you on that...

It appears that Ibn ‘Arabi’s response to his friend’s request is not really destined for a conventional audience, but for the friend, whom Ibn ‘Arabi calls a trusted intimate. Nonetheless, the separate lexic is somewhat simpler than the excerpt in the Fusūṣ, though both contain substantially the same terms (in precisely the reverse order), and it seems to be aimed more at the Sufi novice. The situation is different with Kāshānī, who in introducing his lengthy dictionary (516 terms in 167 pages) states that he wrote it for the scholars of the traditional and intellectual sciences (who) did not recognize the technical terms of Sufism. As James Morris has pointed out, Kāshānī wrote on Sufism principally for mystically inclined intellectuals and scholars trained in the Avicennian philosophical tradition. By adopting a philosophical approach, Kāshānī made his dictionary an intellectual commentary on Sufi vocabulary for non-Sufis.

What are the sources of the terms in the Sufi lexicons? The studies of Massignan and, more recently, Paul Nwyia have shown the fundamental importance of the Qur’ān in the formulation of the Sufi vocabulary. This point should not be overstressed, however. Massignan’s establishment of the Qur’ānic and Islamic sources of Sufi language served the purpose of refuting the early Orientalist theories that sought extra-Islamic origins (Christian, Greek, or Indian) for Sufism. The Sufis’ reliance on the Qur’ān is unquestionably the beginning point for understanding the language of Sufism, but the controversies over novel and un-Qur’ānic terms in Sufism are sufficient indication that the Sufis went outside Qur’ānic language to formulate their insights. Massignan himself pointed out three other sources of Sufi terminology: Arabic grammar and the Islamic religious sciences, the early schools of Islamic theology, and the vocabulary of the Hellenistic sciences. Many of the terms that occur in the early Sufi lexicons are not to be found in the Qur’ān at all; since our concern here is not linguistic but hermeneutic, for the moment it will suffice to make this general observation. Academic inquiries about literary sources (Quellenforschung) are in any case inclined to fasten on minutiae to the neglect of authors’ intentions. The Sufi authors are unanimous in agreeing that the real source of their terminology is mystical experience, a point that is examined more fully below. As far as the definitions themselves are concerned, poetic testimonies and quotations from authoritative Sufis appear frequently, particularly in the works of Sārāj and Qushayrī. Occasionally, verses from the Qur’ān are cited as illustrations. There is sometimes a wide variation in the definitions themselves, from one author to another; each one seems to have felt a considerable freedom to add to or subtract from the received definitions, in accordance with personal experience or the authoritative pronouncement of a teacher.

The loose arrangement of terms in the Sufi lexicons suggests, moreover, that small groupings of related but discrete mystical experiences form the basic units of terms that are defined. Most of the definitions are psychological, in terms of the soul’s experience of different aspects of God; this is true even of poetic phrases and metaphorical terms usually given objectified and philosophical meanings in non-Sufi contexts. Overall, there is no discernable order to the terms in these dictionaries, alphabetical or otherwise (here, again, Kāshānī breaks the pattern of the early dictionaries by adopting a standard alphabetical arrangement). The lexicons instead group words into sets of two, three, or four, based on similarity of derivation (from a single root), semantic clusters, rhyme, grammatical form, semantic polarity, or parallel phraseology. Comparison of the sequence of terms in the different lexicons shows a number of sections of terms that are repeated in roughly the same order, but with some variation. It is possible that a core list of Sufi mystical terms was widely used in oral teaching, and later became the basis for the similarity of sequence in the different texts; the similarities are not so great, though, as to suggest literary dependence in every case.
All the Sufi authors agree that their special terms designate mystic experiences, variously designated by such names as "realities" (haqq), "meanings" (ma'ani), "states" (hay'ah), "stations" (maqâli), "unveiling" (kha'ir), etc. In his discussion of the ecstatic nature of Sufi terminology, points out that mystical states are the result not of effort but divine grace: "There [the Sufis] realities are not collected by any sort of effort nor are gained by any kind of action; rather, they are meanings that God has promised to the hearts of a people, and by the realities of which he selects the consciences of a people." Sufi esotericism, jealously guarding the secrets, is therefore designed to prevent wild misunderstandings on the part of people who have no access to the underlying experiences of encounter with God. Rûzûbân becomes rhapsodic in describing the mystical sources of Sufi language:

Because there are certain words that are vessels for secrets and charged with light, a subtle commentary will be spoken on this, God willing, so that the listener may recognize the understanding of the folk's expressions [shairat], and know their indication [qārah]. Those words hold the cyphers [fusul] of the treasures of subtleties of [divine] commands, the stopping-places of the secrets of [mystical] statements, the announcements of [divine] commands, the deserts of gnosia, and the radiance of the lights of unveilings, which are disclosed to the beginners in love in the journeying of spirits and conscious, from the revelation of the manifestation of eternity, the eternal speech, the unique [divine] actions, and the realities of the manifestation of the [divine] attributes. Since with one taste of the drink of the spirits' fonts, in the unique and marvelous subtleties of the hidden world, they become masters of their momentary state [wujûd], they make an indication of that sweetness with these words. 3

The rushing torrent of words does not immediately reveal a pattern of interpretation, but on closer examination the sources expressed by mystical terms can be discerned again; the "expressions," "tradition," and "cyphers" derive from the divine commands, mystical states, gnosia, and unveilings. Rûzûbân also gives a theological content to these experiences, consisting of eternity, the speech of God, and the divine actions and attributes (all terms familiar to Islamic dialectical theology). He insists, further, that mystical terminology has a firm relationship with states that are fully known to the adept: "Every cypher is connected to a station, every indication is the description of a state, and every expression is the discovery of an unveiling. None knows save the master of stations and the adept of indications. I shall repeat these points and names from the marvel of their states, so that you may know how sweet and subtle is the elegance of their motions." In most of the entries of his dictionary, Rûzûbân therefore begins with the definition of Sâra' or another clear descriptor, and then follows with a characterization of the experiential basis of the term, which he introduces with the phrase "its reality is..." Kâshânî also agrees with the experiential grounding of Sufi terminology, though he puts it in a typically intellectual and systematic way: "I have indicated that the principles mentioned in the book are from the stations of the folk, which ramify into a thousand stations. I have pointed out the quality of their ramifications and that which distinguishes the quality of their ramifications according to their type." Whether poetic like Rûzûbân or systematic like Kâshânî, the Sufis maintain that the essence of mystical terminology is the experience.

The experiential nature of the Sufi vocabulary is particularly evident in the terms from grammatical categories. Even the terms for "word" and "name" have reference to mystical experience. To give some parallel examples: Sâra' begins his definition of "name" (ism) prosaically, as "words put to give information about the named by a naming, to affirm the named; if the words fail, its meaning is not separated from the named." In his view of language, meaning transcends the name. Rûzûbân partially translates and expands on this definition in a more overtly mystical way: "certain words by which they give information about the named. The name is reality is the attribute of the named. Know that the names [of God] manifest in the hearts of the faithful so that their certainty may increase." In this definition, it becomes clear that in speaking of "name" and "the named," Sufis tend naturally to think of names of God (the ninety-nine names derived from the Qur'ân) and how they experience God through those names, which are theologically the divine attributes. Since the names of God form a staple of Sufi meditation, it is scarcely surprising that the divine names are assumed to be the main referents for the term "name." For Ibn 'Arâbî, names other than the names of God are not even included in the definition; he defines "name" as "that one
of the divine names that governs the state of the devotees during his momentary state." Likewise, Ibn 'Arabi defines "word" (hayy) as "that expression by which God addresses you." In the Sufi lexicon, all words and names function in the relationship of intimacy between the human soul and God.

The semantic categories of mystical language have an obviously experiential dimension, but their meaning is so transcendent that it is sometimes very difficult to pin down. Rûhîbân likes to use the word "cypher" (râma'), a term that occurs once in the Qur'an (3.41) to describe the signs by which the silent Zachariah communicated to his people. As Rûhîbân defines it, "cypher is the inner meaning [mu'ann] hidden beneath the external speech, which no one can grasp except those who are worthy of it. The cypher of the hidden realities pronounced by the tongue are the subtleties of knowledge is the secret in inverted letters." The inner secret is so far beyond the outer speech that the letters of the word are described as "inverted" in comparison. An Arabic word quoted by Sarraj may have assumed silent Zachariah as the model of esoteric symbolism: "When they speak, may the goal of their cyphers incapacitate you, and when they are silent, how far you are from joining Him!" Another favorite semantic category is "indication" (izâghah), which almost means "gesture" and implies a communication of so subtle a nature that it can scarcely be verbalized. As Sarraj describes it, "The indication is that which is hidden from the speaker's revelation of it by verbal expression, because of the sublety of its meaning. Abî 'All al-Rûhîbân said, 'This knowledge of ours is an indication which, when it becomes an expression, is hidden.'" Verbization conceals reality; esotericism is inevitable. For Rûhîbân, "indication" is primarily the inner communication with God, and only derivatively is it the mystic's account of the experience to others:

The reality of indication is the shining of the light of hidden subtle speech with God in the clothing of consciousness during the onslaught of finding God [mu'âlîd] in the heart. The gnostic alludes to that from the mine of union with the tongue of reality for the people of the presence, so that he may thereby make an indication of that which is unveiled to him in the expansiveness of "the spirit of the spirit," which is present, witnessing, and speaking from God to God."

The essence of mystical language is, again, the mystical experience, which word attempts to convey: this is above all true of the controversial "ecstatic expressions" (sâhîthiyûd) of Sufism, which burst all conventional bounds in their intensity. What are the implications of the Sufi lexicon for the general concept of mystical language? The "contextual" studies of mysticism in the 1978 and 1983 volumes edited by Steven Katz have stressed how mystical experience is preconditioned by traditional concepts and metaphysical structures. Katz observes that "there is a clear causal connection between the religious and social structure one brings to experience and the nature of one's actual experience." Without denying the importance of religious and social background as a background for mystical experience, I would not wish to reduce this complex phenomenon to pure inmanence through psychologism; to state that mystical experience is a mediated, configured outcome of epistemological activity, as does Katz, might be interpreted as a one-sided relationship between language and experience, in which the built-in expectations of language have a "self-fulfilling prophetic aspect" for the experiential outcome. Let us see how a broad contextual understanding of mystical language might apply to Sufism, and whether there are adequate reasons for resisting sociological and psychologistic reductionism. Sufis certainly use the theological and legal language of the Islamic tradition. Their special mystical teachings, too, constitute a tradition of consolidated wisdom and experience. Mystical teaching presupposes that there are certain goals that the teacher communicates to the student, toward which the student is guided; the student's attempts at understanding are corrected, shaped, and stimulated in the proper direction. Sufis were thus aware of the intentional function of language, above all as used in teaching, and this intentional function of mystical language is the basis of the Sufi lexicons. The terms used to indicate the master-disciple relationship put into practice the heart of this personal connection: the disciple is the murid, or seekor (aspirant), and the master is the murid, or object of search (that which is desired). Words are useful in the teaching to help shape the categories by which the student will approach experience, but since the Sufi terminology opens up unsuspected new possibilities of experience, the effect of absorbing them is broadening rather than narrowing. Yet the study of Sufi materials
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is not intended to be a solitary activity. The teaching is an interper-
sonal process, not an abstract doctrine. If it is correct to assume 
that the Sufi lexicons are an outgrowth of oral teaching, that sug-
gests even more strongly the importance of the personal teaching 
factor. In Sufism, as in the hadith-based religious sciences gen-
erally, the focus on the personal source of the teaching is an essen-
tial part of the disciple's ability to remember the teacher's words, 
to preserve them for himself and others.37 The intentional language 
as used in the teaching relationship has two implications: first, it is 
language addressed to a specific audience for the sake of creating 
the conditions for the desired experience and understanding, not 
an independent body of philosophical propositions; and second, this 
language is a process implying the polar relationships of tran-
scendence, in which the master and disciple occupy roles analogous 
to those of divinity and humanity.38 Each of those implications 
needs to be addressed separately.

The intentionality of mystical language in Sufism as a teaching 
point in certain experiential sources, but this is an enterprise that 
is distinct from instruction in abstract philosophical positions. Su-
film needs to be understood in this kind of "contextual" fashion, 
for the master-disciple relationship decisively shapes the interpre-
tive tradition. The views of W. T. Stace on mysticism, which have 
been so trenchantly criticized in the previous volumes of this series, 
would not in fact advance our understanding of Sufism apprecia-
ably.39 The abstract monoism of Stace, it has been rightly observed, 
destroys the meaning of the traditional religious language of mysti-
cism, regarding it as mere camouflage retained to satisfy the ortho-
dox and provide conventional means of communication. Such an 
approach would have been familiar to the Sufis, being reminiscent 
of the views of the Arab-Islamic philosophers like Ibn Sinâ (Avi-
cenna, d. 1037), who regarded religion as an imitation of philoso-
phy through the imagination. Although there was some overlap 
in the aims, epistemologies, and terminology of philosophy and Su-
fism, the intellectualism of the Aristotelian philosophers was fun-
damentally in contrast with the Sufis' insistence on attaining a state 
beyond reason.40 Thus when the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rusd 
(Averroes, d. 1198) asked Ibn 'Arabi if the truths known to 
the philosophers and the Sufis were the same, the answer was "yes . . . and no."41 The vital element of personal verification by experi-
ence (ahabqah) has for some philosophers given way to abstrac-
tion. Even so, let us remember that consistency for its own sake 
was not a goal of philosophy either, to the degree that it also was a 
teaching tradition. The Jewish philosopher Maimonides spoke for 
the Arab-Islamic intellectual tradition as well when he pointed to 
the need to adapt knowledge to the capacities of particular audi-
ences as one of the principal causes of authorial inconsistency.42 
This principle of esoterism in philosophical teaching is entirely 
paralleled to that of Hujwîrî for Sufi teaching, which is "better in-
struction and simplification of intricacies to approximately the un-
derstanding of the aspirant."43 Abstract propositions, whether 
those of Stace about "mysticism" or those of rationalist philoso-
phers in general, are not the subject of Sufi teaching. The priority 
of teaching over reason received a comparable stress in Shi'ism. The 
Ismâ'îlî theologian Hâsân-i Sabbah underlined the essential im-
portance of the imam's teaching authority by pointing out that 
reason alone cannot be a guide: if one refuses another's position by 
reason, one is acting as a teacher.44 Even the doctrines of Islamic 
theology are not the subject of Sufi teaching, though it is impos-
sible to separate the language of Sufism from its theological en-
vironment. Therefore, to reduce Sufi teaching to the terms of its 
theology or "ontological structure" can be another form of de-con-
textualizing.45

The intentionality of mystical language in Sufism assumes the 
master-disciple relationship, as mentioned earlier, and within this 
language each term implies transcendence as both structure and 
experience. The role of the guide (whether master, Prophet, or 
God) is to act as a check on individual self-will and to open up the 
soul to what the Sufis call the "realities," "stations," and "names." 
The technical terminology of Sufism, properly understood, has 
the same function. An example is Kûtbi's definition of a "visita-
tion" (wârid): "The source of 'visitation' is the unveiling of the 
gnostic's object (murâd), which enters spontaneously [bi-qad], 
increasing his longing."46 The intentionality of the "visitation" as 
the unveiling of the "object" coincides with the intentionality of 
focusing on the master; as we have seen, both the unveiling and 
the master are the "object" (murâd). As Sârî'î defines the term, 
"the murâd is the gnostic in whom there remains no seeking [irâd], 
who has attained the goals, and who has expressed the states, sta-
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...aims, and seekings, for he is the sought object (μυαλόν) by which is sought that which is sought.57 The one who has attained the goals, and who can express them, is not to be distinguished from them. The expression of the goals in the form of teaching indicates the transcendent experience to the student through a term or concept, just as the teaching personally mediates the attained experience. And just as transcendence is built into the teaching relationship, the Sufi sources agree that the language of Sufism has been articulated to express experiences that are transcendental. Although known and intended as object, the experience comes unasked, without reference to the aspirant's volition and beyond one's conscious control. It is for this reason that the Sufi authors define even semantic categories like “word” and “name” in terms of an experience of divine-human interaction. At the risk of repetition, let me stress that the Sufi vocabulary does not objectify the transcendent as a separate “object,” but constitutes it as transcendent in consciousness. The transcendent is indicated by the various experiential modes that the Sufi tradition has defined.

If the experiential and transcendental orientation just outlined fairly corresponds to the self-understanding of the Sufis, can we generalize from this case to speak about mystical language more generally? If we call the Sufi tradition mystical, then mysticism is not a particular doctrine or even a particular experience, and the term should not be used in an objectified way; it can, however, be useful as a term to describe the tendency to return to the experiential sources of philosophical and theological symbols. The very origin of the concept of experience in Western thought attests to a tension with rationalism, whether religious, philosophical, or scientific; it is an experience that enlarges the field of thought.58 In religion, it was primarily the Protestant reformers who invoked religious experience against the authority and doctrine of the Catholic church, and this non-doctrinal usage came in to help William James use the term in his classic study.59 In the scientific field, along with Baconianism, alchemy was another source of our concept of experience in its struggle against Aristotelian orthodoxy; alchemy, of course, had religious implications as well. Here I would like to invoke an image from a seventeenth-century alchemical text, which allegorically depicts Experience as the Queen of Heaven, before whom Philosophy bows down and worships. The poem concludes,

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There are some Philosopher as one filled with grace,
Whose looks did shew that she had byne in some Heavenly place;
For oft she wipt her Eyes,
And oft she bowed her knees.
And oft she kissed the Steps with dread,
Whereon Experience did tread;
And oft she cast her Head on high
And oft full low she cast her Eye
Experience for to enjoy.59

So, with apologias to Philo, I would like to suggest that we think of philosophy (and by extension language) as the handmaiden of experience. This is not to suggest that language and prior conceptual formation have no role in mystical experience; their role is very real and significant, but it remains secondary to the experience itself. It cannot be denied that mystical language is intrinsically connected to religious and social contexts. Yet to assert that these religious and social contexts have a dominant causal relationship to mystical experience and its interpretation is, in my view, unjustified, and it contradicts the very structure of mystical language as discussed above. If mysticism always has a religious and social aspect, then perhaps religion and society always have a mystical aspect. Here Ibn 'Arabi might fundamentally agree with Nagarjuna, that there is no nirvāna without samsāra; transcendence and immanence are relational poles, not hypostatic entities.60 Eric Voegelin, in his illuminating studies of the experiential sources of Western civilization, has convincingly argued that the interpretive symbol, the experience of reality, and consciousness itself are inseparable aspects of a participatory whole: "A vision is not a dogma but an event in metaphysical reality... . There is no 'object' of the vision other than the vision as received; and there is no 'subject' of the vision other than the response in a man's soul to divine presence."61 Voegelin has also given an incisive analysis of the deformations that occur when philosophical prepositions and theological doctrines are separated from the experiences to which they were originally tied.62 The vocabulary of Sufism is one kind of source that can help us avoid this error; if we are right in generalizing about this mystical tendency, then mystical vocabularies in other religious traditions will have a similar experiential thrust.

The mystical language of Sufism as found in the Sufi lexicons is
an expression of experiences of transcendence formulated according to the inner structure of the master-disciple relationship. In this sense, there is no point in arguing that mystical experience is immediate or "pure" experience. To the contrary, the teaching tradition is a powerful mediation that enables the individual to have symbolic access to experiences that might otherwise never be imagined. Yet the fundamentally transcendental orientation of the symbols and myths of mystical teaching is liberating rather than limiting. The model suggested by the Sufi lexicons condenses mystical experiences in terms designed to reveal the experiential possibilities to the seeker who is prepared for them. At the same time, these terms tend to shut out those who are not participants in the teaching process. Outsiders will naturally tend to analyze mystical terms by their externals, but mystical language retains the ability to indicate the transcendence by its own reverberation in the soul.

Notes


3. For details of dictionary arrangements, see Haywood, Arabic Lexicography, and Sezgin, Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums, pp. 7-16.


Mysticism and Language

Chishti leader Dhaqāq Shah also compiled an excellent Urdu lexicon of Sufism, Sīr-i Dilbūrān (Karachi, 1465/1985), with many contributions from Arabic and Persian authorities.


16. Massignon, "Essai sur les origines du lexique technique, pp. 19-20; the index of Hâlaljī’s terms is on pp. 19-36.


20. Each definition concludes with a term (X), followed by the phrase "And if you say, 'What is X?' then we say, 'X is... '" Ibn 'Arabi traces this "strange method" (harbīq ḥayrāf of chaining to the early Sufi Ḳibībīn ibn Adham (ca. 765) (Fudūḥ, vol. 2, p. 134).


22. The lexicon in the Bayān contains mostly brief versions of the definitions in the Fudūḥ lexicon, and it lacks the additional parts of the definitions that chain the terms one to another in the Fudūḥ. Thus in the Bayān, Ibn 'Arabi avoids, on the surface, the complex problem of the interrelationship of the technical terms of Sufism.

23. Khâshânī, "Abū’r-Raṣūl’s Dictionary, p. 3; he states particularly that he wrote his lexicon to assist the comprehension of his commentaries on Ṣuhîh al-Manāfikī al-Sūfīn, Ibn 'Arabi’s Fudūḥ al-Makhtūkh, and the Qur’ān.


25. Massignon cites twenty-four terms taken directly from the Qur’ān and an equal number derived from the roots occurring in the Qur’ān (Ibn

56. Rizvîhish, Shähr-i Şahîbîyûsî, p. 549. Likewise, the Sufi Najm al-Dîn Kubrî (d. 1220), when asked by the philosopher Fakhr al-Dîn Râkî (d. 1209) how the Sufis know God, replied, "By certain visitations [wîrîd] that occur in the heart, and which the soul is incapable of falsifying" (Ibtîhîl Şahîhî, Ābâhî Hâğı’-numû, Shahr-i Jâmî Jâhân-nâmâ [Hyderabad, 1313/1895-6], pp. 7-8).

57. Sârrî, Kitâb al-Luma’ fi l-tazawwâf, p. 342. Ibn ‘Arîn defines the murîd as "an expression for the one who is ravished of his seeking while his affairs remain in readiness; he has passed all the customs and the stations without effort" (Rûdî, p. 2).


63. Voegelin, Ecumenic Age, pp. 1-57.