

INTRODUCTION

The full name of the book translated here is *The Repose of the Spirits: Explaining the Names of the All-Opening King* (*Rawḥ al-arwāḥ fī sharḥ asmā' al-malik al-fattāḥ*). It is the first and one of the longest commentaries on the divine names in the Persian language. It was written by Aḥmad Sam'ānī, who belonged to a prominent scholarly family from Merv in Central Asia and died at the young age of forty-six in the year 1140. It is a remarkable expression of Islamic spirituality and one of the most accessible books on the inner meanings of the Quran ever written.

Commentary on the divine names was a common genre in Arabic, but Sam'ānī did not write in imitation of earlier scholars, who were mainly lexicologists and theologians. He avoided their abstract analyses and arid exactitude, highlighting instead the divine love that permeates all of existence. His book prefigures the poetical tradition that was to bloom with 'Aṭṭār (d. ca. 1221), Rūmī (d. 1273), and Sa'dī (d. 1292). Recent research has even shown that Ḥāfīz (d. 1390), typically considered the greatest of all Persian poets, composed scores of verses that follow *The Repose of the Spirits* almost verbatim.¹ *Repose* offers a clear depiction of the worldview underlying the work of the poets and celebrates love with the same sensitivity to beautiful language. In contrast to the poets, however, Sam'ānī grounds his text explicitly in the names of God that are the archetypes of all that exists.

It seems that no one else before Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240)—who was born sixteen years after Sam'ānī died—was able to plumb the depths of divine love and mercy with such insight. Ibn 'Arabī, however, wrote for the intellectual elite. He produced several thousand pages of highly sophisticated and erudite prose and a good deal of poetry. His opus was accessible only to those familiar with the whole range of Islamic sciences—Quran, Hadith, Arabic grammar, jurisprudence, Kalam, Sufism, and philosophy. In contrast, Sam'ānī wrote in the spoken Persian of Khorasan (which is practically identical with today's literary Persian in Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia), and he addressed the general populace. He exposed the underlying message of the Islamic tradition with exceptional clarity and extraordinary subtlety.

Sam'ānī's name was almost forgotten in later times, but *The Repose of the Spirits* was certainly being read. One of the few later scholars who did provide the author's name along with the title of his book was the Ottoman bibliophile Kātip Çelebi, also known as Ḥājī Khalīfa (d. 1657), though he said nothing about the book's content.² The first text on which *Repose* left a noticeable impression was the ten-volume Persian commentary on the Quran, *Kashf al-asrār* (*The Unveiling of the Mysteries*) by Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, who lived in Maybud near Yazd in central Iran. Maybudī says that he started writing his book in the year 1126, when Sam'ānī would have been thirty-two.

He shows no sign of having read *Repose* until the beginning of volume six, when he suddenly starts making wholesale use of it, without ever mentioning his source. Nowadays we would call this plagiarism, but in both Persian and Arabic it was common practice at the time. In his introduction Maybudī says that he based his book on a Quran commentary by the famous Hanbali jurist and Sufi ‘Abdallāh Anṣārī (d. 1088), though no such work is known to have existed. Maybudī often quotes Anṣārī, but the second half of his book depends much more on Sam‘ānī.³

One of the few explicit references to *The Repose of the Spirits* in the later literature is found in *Fawā'id al-fu'ād* (Benefits of the Heart), the Persian conversations of Niẓām al-Dīn Awliyā' (d. 1325), the patron saint of Delhi (translated into English by Bruce Lawrence). The compiler, Amīr Ḥasan Sijzī, says that he visited Niẓām al-Dīn on June 8, 1312 with a certain book in hand. Noticing the book, Niẓām al-Dīn said, "Among the books the shaykhs have written, *The Repose of the Spirits* has much comfort. . . . Qāḍī Ḥamīd al-Dīn Nāḡawrī learned it and spoke about it a great deal from the pulpit. Among the books written by the former masters, *Nourishment of the Hearts* is a beautiful book in Arabic, and *The Repose of the Spirits* in Persian."⁴ Given that *Nourishment of the Hearts* (*Qūt al-qulūb*) by Abū Ṭālib Makkī (d. 996) is one of the most important books of early Sufism, Niẓām al-Dīn's high opinion of it is not surprising. His mention of *The Repose of the Spirits*, however, shows that it also was being recognized as an outstanding presentation of Sufi teachings.

As for Qāḍī Ḥamīd al-Dīn Nāḡawrī (d. 1246), he was a major disciple of Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī (d. 1235), the eponym of the Chishtī Order, and wrote several books. One of these, a short Persian work on love called *Lawā'ih*, was published sixty years ago in Iran but ascribed wrongly to ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī. It is the only printed text I have seen that quotes *Repose* by name, though he does not mention its author.⁵ He also wrote an unpublished Persian commentary on the divine names called *Ṭawāli‘ al-shumūs* (Rising suns), a scan of which was acquired for me by my friend Seyed Amir Hossein Asghari. At 1,040 pages of twenty-two lines each, the manuscript is about fifty percent longer than *The Repose of the Spirits*. It is a fresh and original interpretation of 103 divine names addressed to practitioners of Sufism, with constant reference to Quran and Hadith. It focuses on love much more than *Repose*, which itself stands apart from its Arabic predecessors because of the same focus. Nāḡawrī rarely quotes from other authors, but he does include about thirty short passages, mostly in Arabic, from *The Repose of the Spirits* and often mentions that "Sam‘ānī" was the author of the book.⁶

It is not clear why *The Repose of the Spirits* escaped the notice of historians of Persian literature and Sufism for most of the twentieth century. Copies are found in various libraries, so the reason is probably not the scarcity of manuscripts. Perhaps it was overlooked because it appears at first glance to be a typical commentary on the divine names. Its title suggests that it would be of interest only to specialists in theology, which has never been a favorite topic among modern scholars of Persian literature. A second reason may be that from the thirteenth century onward the formulation of Sufi teachings came to be dominated by the much more theoretical and philosophical approach of Ibn ‘Arabī. Thus, for example, commentators on Rūmī's *Mathnawī* typically drew from Ibn ‘Arabī's perspective. If instead they had drawn from Sam‘ānī, the result would have been much closer to Rūmī's own mode of presentation.

Repose was first brought to the attention of specialists by the indefatigable manuscript-reader Muḥammad-Taqī Dānīshpazhūh (d. 1996), who published an article in 1968 describing seven manuscripts that he had seen in various libraries. Only three of these manuscripts mention the author’s name, two in corrupted form. Dānīshpazhūh wrote that the book was a precious example of early Persian prose, full of stories in the style of homilists and Sufi teachers and adorned with Persian and Arabic poetry. “The prose,” he said, “is fluent, eloquent, heart-pleasing, and ancient, so much so that you never become tired of reading it and you want to keep on reading to the end.”⁷ In the following year the unsurpassed Rūmī expert Badī‘ al-Zamān Furūzānfar (d. 1970) confirmed Dānīshpazhūh’s evaluation of the book in his commentary on Rūmī’s *Mathnawī*. He also pointed out that Rūmī’s tale of the nomad and the caliph (in book 1, vv. 2244ff.) is based on an Arabic passage from *Repose* (288).⁸ Furūzānfar then devoted two pages to describing the book, since it was still almost unknown in the secondary literature. He mentioned the beauty of the prose, the great variety of anecdotes about the Prophet, the Companions, and other saintly figures, and went on to agree with Dānīshpazhūh, on the basis of various historical sources, that the author must be Abu’l-Qāsim Aḥmad ibn Maṣṣūr Sam‘ānī.

I will have more to say about the specific characteristics of Sam‘ānī’s book, but something first needs to be said about the author and the milieu of Islamic learning in which he flourished.

The Sam‘ānīs

Aḥmad Sam‘ānī’s birthplace, the oasis city of Merv, is now a UNESCO heritage site near the modern city of Mary in Turkmenistan. In Achaemenid times it was the capital of the province of Margiana. After Alexander’s invasion, it was known for a time as Alexandria. It remained the capital of the province during the empires that followed, and the last Sassanid emperor, Yazdegerd III, was killed near the city in the year 651 while fleeing Arab invaders. It then became the capital, or one of the capitals, of Khorasan, a region that embraced the eastern part of present-day Iran, most of Afghanistan, and a good deal of Central Asia. In 1037 Merv was conquered by the Seljuq Turks, under whom it continued to flourish. It soon became one of the largest cities in the world, certainly a rival to Baghdad, the seat of the Abbasid caliphate. It was during this period that the Sam‘ānīs came to prominence. The city’s decline began with its pillage by the Ghuzz nomads in 1153, thirteen years after Aḥmad Sam‘ānī’s death. In 1221 the Mongols under Tolui, a son of Genghis Khan, destroyed Merv and massacred the entire population.

Merv was known as a great center of learning. The famous geographer Yāqūt Ḥamawī (d. 1229) spent three years in Merv in his search for knowledge, leaving in 1219. He wrote that he would have stayed until the end of his life if not for the impending invasion. Its people were good-natured, and the city had ten libraries endowed with excellent books. These were of such easy access that he would sometimes take out over two hundred volumes at once. Indeed, he says, “I collected most of the details for this and my other books from those libraries.” Two of the ten libraries belonged to madrasas with which the Sam‘ānīs were involved—the Nizāmiyya and the ‘Amīdiyya—and two to the Sam‘ānī family itself.⁹

Other important cities of Khorasan at the time included Herat, the home of ‘Abdallāh Anṣārī, about two hundred miles south of Merv; Nishapur, a great center of learning and the birthplace of ‘Aṭṭār, about two hundred miles southwest; and Bukhara, the home of the famous Hadith scholar Bukhārī, 225 miles northeast. Juwayn, the birthplace of the theologian Imām al-Ḥaramayn Juwaynī (d. 1085), a teacher of Sam‘ānī’s father Maṣṣūr, lies 120 miles southwest of Merv. Tus, the birthplace of Juwaynī’s best-known student, Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī (d. 1111), is about thirty miles southwest of Juwayn. Balkh, the area from which Rūmī hailed, lies about two hundred miles east-southeast of Merv. Ghazna, the seat of the Ghaznavid Empire (977–1163) and the home of Sanā’ī (d. 1135), the first great Sufi poet, is about 450 miles southeast. As for the largest city in the area today, Mashhad, “the place of martyrdom”—that is, the martyrdom of the eighth Shi’ite Imam, ‘Alī ibn Mūsā Riḍā (d. 818)—it is located about 150 miles southwest of Merv; at the time it was still a small town outside of Tus known as Nawqān, famous as a place of pilgrimage to the tomb of the Imam and also as the location of the grave of the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 809).¹⁰ I mention the proximity of these cities because today they belong to four different countries and might be imagined to pertain to distinct areas rather than the same cultural environment. As for more distant cities of the Islamic world, Isfahan is about seven hundred miles southwest of Merv, Baghdad about 1,100 miles west, and Mecca about 1,800 miles southwest. These distances are straight lines, so travel between any of these cities would entail much more hardship than the mileage suggests.

The only known contemporary account of Aḥmad Sam‘ānī is by his nephew, Abū Sa‘d ‘Abd al-Karīm Sam‘ānī (d. 1166), a well-known scholar who wrote about one hundred books and treatises, most of which were dedicated to Hadith and Hadith-transmitters. The bulk of his corpus, which included a history of Merv—the longest of his books—seems to have disappeared with the destruction of the city. Two of his biographical works have survived. One is the five-volume *Ascriptions (al-Anṣāb)*, which provides accounts of hundreds of scholars according to their *nisba*, that is, their “ascription” to tribe, family, region, or whatever. The other is an account of his own teachers, abridged by an unknown author, called *The Abridgement of the Lexicon of the Shaykhs (al-Muntakhab min Mu‘jam al-shuyūkh)*, providing details on 1,446 of those who transmitted Hadith and other learning to him.¹¹ Another work, his addendum to the history of Baghdad by Khaṭīb Baghdādī (d. 1071), was somewhat longer than *Ascriptions* and widely used in the later biographical literature, but it seems to be lost. ‘Abd al-Karīm’s fame as an inveterate traveler and collector of shaykhs is suggested by the historian Ibn al-Najjār (d. 1245), who said that he heard Hadith from seven thousand scholars.¹²

To understand ‘Abd al-Karīm Sam‘ānī’s status in the tradition, we need to recall that for centuries one of the primary occupations of Muslim scholars was preserving the basic teachings of the religion by transmitting Hadith. It was never considered sufficient to read a hadith in a book. One needed to “hear” (*samā‘*) the text from a teacher. The teacher in turn must have heard it from a teacher, who had heard it from a teacher, and so on back to the Prophet. Part of the process of hearing was to hear the chain of transmission, the *isnād*. The importance of the science of *rijāl*, “the men,” arises from here: It was always fair to ask if the scholars who transmitted a hadith were reliable transmitters. Ad hominem criticism was the rule. If any link of the *isnād* was unreliable, one could not be sure that the saying had come from the Prophet.

One of the many criteria for judging a hadith’s reliability was the length of the chain—the shorter, the better. This meant that seekers of Hadith often exerted great effort to find scholars who had received hadiths with short *isnāds*, even if these were the same hadiths that they had heard from other teachers. One of ‘Abd al-Karīm’s claims to fame is that he heard hadiths from many scholars with “high” (‘*ālī*) rather than “low” (*nāzil*) chains, that is, short rather than long.

The extent to which scholars dedicated themselves to collecting hadiths is hard for us to imagine today and, I think, for many of their contemporaries. Abū Hāmid Ghazālī, for example, thought that it was much more important to put one’s efforts into actualizing the fullness of intelligence (‘*aql*). However this may be, there is an extensive biographical literature on transmitters of Hadith, and these works have provided historians with one of their main sources of information on individuals. ‘Abd al-Karīm’s works are among the earliest in this genre.

It is important to understand that ‘Abd al-Karīm wrote both *Ascriptions* and *Abridgement* with the aim of describing ‘*ulamā*’, “scholars,” a word that means literally “knowers.” He typically uses this word in a narrow sense to mean those who transmitted Hadith. He often says that so-and-so was “one of the folk (*ahl*) of the Quran and of knowledge,” meaning that the individual was learned both in the Holy Book and in Hadith. If the person happened to have other qualifications, he specifies this by saying that he was also a jurist, a Sufi, a Quran-reciter, and so on.

That ‘Abd al-Karīm should use the generic word “knowledge” to mean knowledge of Hadith shows his limited standpoint in searching for knowledge and in providing accounts of individuals in his books. For example, he does not have a listing for the word “Ghazālī” in *Ascriptions*, even though he was well informed about Abū Hāmid Ghazālī and his younger brother Aḥmad (d. 1126), author of a short Persian classic on love. If he did not feel that their name was worthy of a separate entry, it is surely because they were not transmitters of “knowledge,” that is, Hadith. Tāj al-Dīn Subkī (d. 1370), author of the well-known biographical tome *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyya* (The Generations of the Shafi’is), quotes ‘Abd al-Karīm as saying about Abū Hāmid Ghazālī, “I do not think that he transmitted any hadiths, or if he did, only a few, for no hadith has been narrated from him.”¹³

In *Ascriptions* ‘Abd al-Karīm dedicates the heading “Sam‘ānī” to an account of his family. In *Abridgement* he describes several of his relatives individually, sometimes adding details not given in *Ascriptions*.¹⁴ He explains that the word Sam‘ānī refers to Sam‘ān, a subdivision of Banū Tamīm, one of the major tribes of Arabia. The patriarch of the Sam‘ānīs in Merv was the learned and pious judge (*qāḍī*) and imam Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1058), who wrote useful works in Arabic grammar and lexicology and was the first of the family to transmit Hadith. Among the handful of books that ‘Abd al-Karīm attributes to him, one has been published, the four-volume *Majmū‘gharā’ib al-aḥādīth* (A Compilation of Rarities in the Hadith), a dictionary of unusual words employed by the Prophet.¹⁵

MANṢŪR IBN MUḤAMMAD

Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Jabbār had two sons, Abu’l-Muẓaffar Manṣūr (1035–96) and Abu’l-Qāsim ‘Alī. The latter was a scholar who traveled to Kerman, married into the family of the local king’s vizier, and continued to teach and transmit Hadith. When he learned that his brother

had changed his *madhhab* (school of jurisprudence) from Hanafi to Shafi'i, he wrote to him and criticized him for leaving the path of their father. Maṣṣūr replied that he had not changed their father's creed (*'aqīda*), only his *madhhab*, because the Hanafis in Merv no longer had proper beliefs. They had all become Qadarīs, that is, "free-willers" (an attribute often attributed to Mu'tazilite theologians), which is to say that they believed people are rewarded or punished in the next world strictly on the basis of their choices in this world (Sam'ānī offers critiques of this position in *Repose*). Eventually the two brothers were reconciled, and 'Alī sent his son Abu'l-'Alā' 'Alī to study with Maṣṣūr. After several years, the younger 'Alī returned to Kirman, and when his father died he took over the family madrasa and the rearing of his siblings. This branch of the family does not seem to have received any further notice by historians.¹⁶

'Abd al-Karīm calls his grandfather Maṣṣūr "the undisputed imam of his era, without equal in his field." His words are not simply family pride. Subkī relates that Imām al-Ḥaramayn Juwaynī, with whom Maṣṣūr studied as a young man, said about him, "Were jurisprudence a fine garment, Abu'l-Muzaffar ibn Sam'ānī would be its embroidery."¹⁷

Maṣṣūr wrote ten books, three of which have been published: a six-volume commentary on the Quran; a five-volume tome on the philosophy of law called *Qawāṭi 'al-adilla fi uṣūl al-fiqh* (The Definitive Proofs in the Principles of Jurisprudence); and a four-volume explication of the differences between Shafi'i and Hanafi jurisprudence, *al-Iṣṭilām fi'l-khilāf bayn imāmayn al-Shāfi'ī wa Abi Ḥanīfa* (The Extirpation: On the Disagreements between the Two Imams, Shāfi'ī and Abū Ḥanīfa). One of his lost books was a collection of one thousand hadiths, ten transmitted from each of one hundred scholars.¹⁸

Maṣṣūr set off for the hajj in 1069, three years after his father's death. He was accompanied by his good friend Ḥusayn ibn Ḥasan Ṣūfī, who said that when they arrived at the first waystation, three farsakhs (about twelve miles) from Merv, Maṣṣūr spent all of his money—five dirhams—on their needs for the day, so they relied on God's bounty for the rest of the trip.¹⁹ Another companion on this pilgrimage, Ḥasan ibn Aḥmad Marwazī, said that whenever they reached a village, they would stay with the Sufis (who commonly put up travelers in their lodges) and Maṣṣūr would search out scholars of Hadith.²⁰ The pilgrims spent a good deal of time in Baghdad, where Maṣṣūr interacted with many scholars of Hadith and jurisprudence. In Mecca he became the companion of Sa'd Zanjānī (d. 1078), under whose influence he changed his *madhhab* from Hanafi to Shafi'i in the year 1070. He studied Hadith with numerous scholars in Mecca without any thought of returning to Merv, but his father appeared to him in a dream and told him to go back. He consulted with Zanjānī, who told him to obey his father, so he returned to Merv in the year 1075.²¹

When Maṣṣūr arrived back in Merv and announced that he had changed his *madhhab*, the Hanafis were dismayed, and this led to rioting in the city. The Shafi'i mosque was shut down, and Maṣṣūr was expelled by the local governor. He was welcomed in Tus and Nishapur and settled down in the latter. The famous scholar and vizier Niẓām al-Mulk, who held office as the virtual ruler of the Seljuq kingdom from 1064 until his murder in 1092, sent him robes of honor and money. He was given a teaching post at the Niẓāmiyya Madrasa, one of many universities established by Niẓām al-Mulk throughout the kingdom. Only in 1086 did he return to Merv, where he taught in a Shafi'i madrasa.²²

A book on the history of Nishapur by ‘Abd al-Ghāfir Fārisī (d. 1135) provides a relatively long account of Manṣūr, in whose sessions the author used to recite the Quran. Indeed Fārisī remarks proudly that Manṣūr “loved my recitation of the Quran more than his own.”²³ He says that Manṣūr was unique in his time “in erudition, *ṭarīqa*, renunciation (*zuhd*), and scrupulosity (*wara‘*); and he belonged to a family of knowledge and renunciation.”²⁴ Renunciation, mentioned twice here in a single sentence, was commonly ascribed to those engaged in the devotional practices of Sufism, so much so that some historians have suggested that there was a gradual evolution within Islamic religiosity from renunciation (or “asceticism” as it is more commonly translated) to “mysticism,” that is, Sufism (*taṣawwuf*). It is probably more accurate to say, as Alexander Knysh has recently argued, that the words renunciation and Sufism were used interchangeably.²⁵

As for the word *ṭarīqa* or “path,” it was commonly used to designate the path to God that Sufis were striving to follow, in which case I use the anglicized form *Tarīqah*. It is possible that in this passage Fārisī is using the word generically to mean Manṣūr’s way of doing things, but it is more likely that he is alluding to an affiliation with Sufism, where the word is understood to mean emulation of the inner life of the Prophet. In this meaning *Tarīqah* is contrasted with “Shariah” (Islamic law), which is based on imitating the Prophet’s outward activity. As Sam‘ānī says in *Repose*, “The master of the whole world in the Shariah and the *Tarīqah* was Muḥammad” (405). Shariah and *Tarīqah* are frequently discussed along with *Haqīqah* (*ḥaqīqa*), the “Reality,” a word that can designate God inasmuch as He lies beyond all things, or the realm of metaphysical things as contrasted with outward and inward practices. Thus Sam‘ānī describes the Prophet as “the peacock in the orchard of the *Haqīqah*, the nightingale in the garden of the *Tarīqah*, and the phoenix in the house of the Shariah” (343). Fārisī uses all three terms while describing the famous Sufi master Abu’l-Qāsim Qushayrī (d. 1072): “He combined the two learnings of the Shariah and the *Haqīqah* and he explained the principles of the *Tarīqah* with the most beautiful explanation.”²⁶

In his account of Manṣūr Sam‘ānī, Fārisī says that he came to Nishapur in his youth and attended the sessions of Imām al-Ḥaramayn Juwaynī, who praised him highly. After he returned from the hajj and was expelled from Merv, he and his retinue were welcomed in Nishapur and given an honored place of residence by order of Niẓām al-Mulḳ. Then he proceeded to hold regular sessions of *tadhkīr*, “reminder,” in which “he was an ocean. He had memorized many stories, fine points, and poems, and he was accepted by the elect and the common.”²⁷

The word *tadhkīr* is derived from *dhikr*, which means to remember and mention. The Quran designates *tadhkīr* as the role of the prophets and their scriptures, and it constantly encourages its readers to practice *dhikr Allāh*, the remembrance and mention of God. *Tadhkīr* came to designate a form of preaching aimed at a wide audience and encouraging *dhikr*, the practice of which is shared by all forms of Sufism. This helps explain why one modern scholar, having quoted Fārisī to the effect that Ghazālī attended sessions of *tadhkīr* held by Abū ‘Alī Fārmadī (d. 1084), translates the word *tadhkīr* as “mystical practices.”²⁸ What Fārisī says about Fārmadī is similar to what he says about Manṣūr: he was “the shaykh of the shaykhs of his era,

unique in his *ṭarīqa* of *tadhkīr*. His *ṭarīqa* had no precedent in expression, refinement, beauty of presentation, sweetness of metaphor, fineness of allusions, and subtleness of elegant words, nor in the impression his speech left in hearts.”²⁹

Notice that Fārisī says Maṣṣūf Sam‘ānī was accepted by the elect (*khāṣṣ*), that is, the scholars, and the common (*‘āmm*), that is, those not well versed in the Quran and Hadith. This probably means that he was speaking Persian, given that only well-trained scholars would be able to follow lectures in Arabic. A good preacher speaks to his audience at the level of their understanding. A lecture delivered in a madrasa to a group of Hadith-transmitters would be different from a sermon delivered in a mosque with its doors open to the general public. A scholar who transmitted Hadith to fellow scholars could keep them glued to his words by providing *isnāds* more “elevated” than what they had. A homilist busy with reminder, however, could not simply cite scripture and list the names of dead scholars unless he wanted to lose his listeners. His job was to bring out the meaning of the transmitted learning in a language that his listeners could understand—all the more so when they were not native speakers of Arabic. Maṣṣūf’s skill at speaking both to the elect and to the common with “stories, fine points, and poems” suggests that his son Aḥmad was continuing a family tradition. The goal of *The Repose of the Spirits* is not to add to the store of the readers’ learning, but rather to open up their hearts to the remembrance of God.

If we look at Maṣṣūf’s three published books, there is little to suggest that he was a master of homily and *tadhkīr*. The most explicit suggestions of his involvement with Sufism come in *Repose*, where Aḥmad quotes him fourteen times. In almost every case the words sound like an aphorism of a Sufi shaykh. Given that Maṣṣūf died when Aḥmad was two years old, he must have heard these sayings from his brothers or other students of his father. It does not seem possible that he could be quoting him directly, even if his nephew ‘Abd al-Karīm says that Aḥmad was recounting (*yunbi’u*) from his father at the age of two.³⁰

I did notice one exception to Maṣṣūf’s neglect of the Sufi dimension of Islam in his printed works. This is a short supplication in the introductory paragraph of *al-Iṣṭilām*, his study of the differences between Hanafi and Shafi’i jurisprudence. The manner in which he brings together contrasting divine and human attributes is thoroughly reminiscent of Sufi rhetoric generally and *The Repose of the Spirits* specifically:

O God, make my breast the storehouse of Your *tawḥīd*, make my tongue the key to Your magnification, and make my limbs the sanctuary of Your obedience, for there is no exaltation except in abasement to You, no wealth except in poverty toward You, no security except in fear of You, no settledness except in disquiet with You, no repose except in grief for Your face, no ease except in approving of Your apportionment, and no delight except in the neighborhood of those brought near to You.³¹

Maṣṣūf had five children, two of whom died in infancy and three of whom became scholars. The eldest of the surviving sons was ‘Abd al-Karīm’s father Abū Bakr Muḥammad, the middle Abū Muḥammad Ḥasan, and the youngest Abu’l-Qāsim Aḥmad, the author of *Repose*.

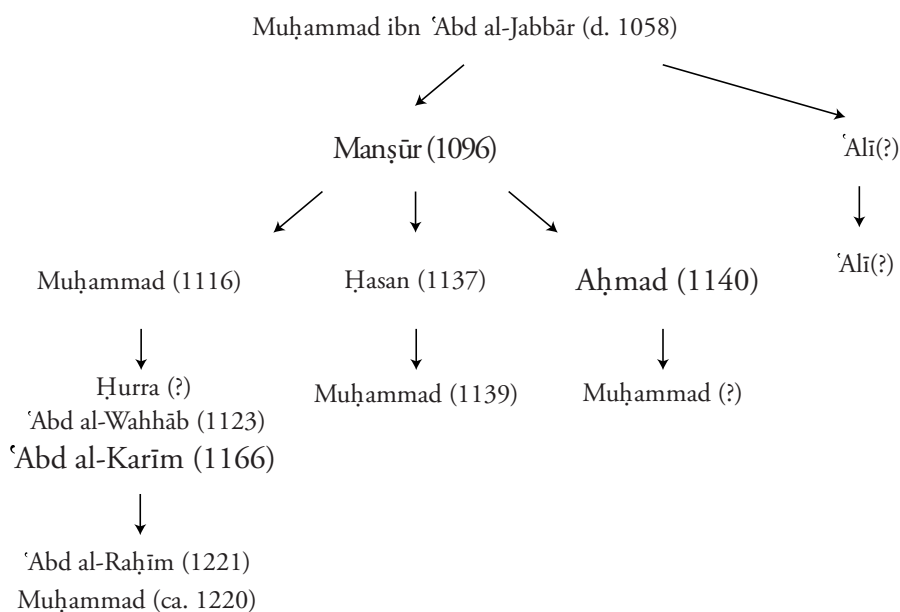
MUHAMMAD IBN MANŞŪR

Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Manşūr (1074–1116) continued in his father’s footsteps as imam, jurist, and scholar of Hadith. According to ‘Abd al-Karīm, Manşūr used to say in his public sessions that his son Muḥammad was more learned and more excellent than himself. An anecdote provided by Subkī suggests the sort of learning in which Muḥammad excelled. Subkī cites as his source ‘Abd al-Karīm, who heard the account from one of his father’s students.

In the sessions of his homilies he used to dictate hadiths with their *isnāds*. One of the contenders protested and said, “Muḥammad Sam‘ānī goes up on the pulpit and lists names that we do not recognize. Perhaps he is just making them up as he goes along.” He wrote these words on a piece of paper, and it was given to him.

After ascending the pulpit, he looked at the paper. Then he narrated the hadith, “If someone lies about me intentionally, let him prepare to take up his seat in the Fire,” giving it by ninety-some routes [of transmission]. Then he said, “If no one in this land knows Hadith, then I seek refuge in God from dwelling in a land where someone does know Hadith. And if someone does know, let him write out ten hadiths with their *isnāds*, leave out a name or two from each *isnād*, and mix up some of the *isnāds*. If I do not discern this and put every name in its place, then he is as he claims.” They did this as a test, and he returned each name to its proper place. The Quran reciters who were reciting in the session that day asked for something, and the attendees gave them one thousand dinars.³²

TABLE I. The Sam‘ānīs



The biographer Ibn Khallikān (d. 1282) quotes ‘Abd al-Karīm as saying that his father performed the hajj in the year 1104, lectured at the Nizāmiyya Madrasa in Baghdad on his way back, and then went to Isfahan to collect Hadith.³³ ‘Abd al-Karīm writes that his father dictated 140 sessions in Hadith, “and anyone who studies them will recognize that no one preceded him in anything like that.” He had a wide knowledge of literature and composed poems in both Arabic and Persian, though he destroyed the poems (“washed away the ink”) before he died, perhaps because he considered poetry too frivolous to be the legacy of a scholar. When he passed away at the age of forty-three, his son ‘Abd al-Karīm was three and a half years old.³⁴

In an account of a shaykh by the name of Aḥmad the Sufi, who lived in the village of Fāz outside Tus, ‘Abd al-Karīm cites an Arabic poem of his father that escaped the destruction of his notebooks. Aḥmad the Sufi heard him recite the poem while he was passing through Fāz on his way back from the hajj:

I dismounted at a village called Fāz
that was sweeter than reaching safety.
I compared all the lands to its earth
and saw them as metaphors for its reality.³⁵

Muḥammad seems to have had two wives. We know nothing about the first other than that she would have been the mother of Amatallāh Ḥurra, who was born in 1098, fifteen years before ‘Abd al-Karīm. Of Ḥurra he says, “My sister was a worthy, chaste woman who studied the Quran a great deal. She was always fasting and was eager in good and in deeds of piety. My father attained for her a license [*ijāza*, i.e., written permission to transmit what one had learned] from Abū Ghālib Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan Bāqillānī of Baghdad. With her I studied hadiths and stories, and from her I received a license in them.”³⁶

‘Abd al-Karīm’s own mother was Fāṭima bint Ḥasan Zandakhānī (ca. 1088–1138). He provides a brief account of her in a list of eighty-two of his female shaykhs. She was born into a prominent family in the village of Zandakhān near Sarakhs, a town located about halfway between Merv and Nishapur. Her father became the *ra’īs* or “headman” of Merv, though the exact function of the headman is unknown.³⁷ She was eager in the good and did much that was honorable and beautiful toward the people.³⁸ Her younger brother Muḥammad studied jurisprudence with her husband Muḥammad, but then he occupied himself with other affairs; he was tortured and killed by the Ghuzz when they pillaged Sarakhs in the year 1155.³⁹ ‘Abd al-Karīm thinks that she was born after 1088, that is, less than ten years before the birth of his sister Ḥurra.

Fāṭima gave birth to her first son, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, in 1111. ‘Abd al-Karīm provides an account of him as one of his own shaykhs in *Abridgement*. Clearly, he uses the word *shaykh* rather loosely. Literally it means an old man, someone whose white hair demands respect, but it was also used to mean teacher, with the connotation of elderliness. Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, however, died at the age of twelve. ‘Abd al-Karīm writes, “My father transmitted Hadith to my elder brother and me in Nishapur. My brother busied himself with literature [*adab*] and read its important books, but death carried him away before he reached puberty. In Nishapur he heard

from ‘Abd al-Ghaffār Shīruwī and ‘Ubayd Qushayrī; and in Merv from Muḥammad Kurā‘ī and others. From him I heard a bit of poetry.”⁴⁰

In another account he tells how his brother’s first shaykh, ‘Abd al-Ghaffār Shīruwī, also came to be his own shaykh. The passage highlights the importance of “hearing,” given that ‘Abd al-Karīm was not yet old enough for kindergarten. In a glowing and relatively long passage he says that Shīruwī was a prominent merchant in Nishapur and Isfahan. After retiring from travel, he proceeded to transmit Hadith for forty years, dying at the age of ninety-six (lunar) in the year 1117, a few months after ‘Abd al-Karīm heard Hadith from him. After mentioning some of Shīruwī’s numerous teachers and students, ‘Abd al-Karīm tells of his own attendance at his sessions, and then goes on to list six texts that he himself had “heard” from him. Given that he mentions Shīruwī as one of his uncle Aḥmad’s shaykhs, it is almost certain that Aḥmad (who would have been twenty-three at the time) was also present at this meeting.

My father took me to Nishapur, and this shaykh came to be present with him in the Abū Naṣr ibn Abī’l-Khayr Madrasa. He brought me and my brother to the session. We heard much from him, and I was a child of three and a half years. Most of the things we heard were written down in the hand of my father. In the *samā* [certificate of hearing] he would write his own name and then write, “And present was his son Abu’l-Muẓaffar ‘Abd al-Wahhāb,” that is, my brother, “who brought along his brother Abū Sa‘d ‘Abd al-Karīm.” Between me and my brother were twenty months.⁴¹

Ibn Khallikān quotes ‘Abd al-Karīm as saying that his father died shortly after returning to Merv from Nishapur.⁴² He was buried next to his own father in Sinjīdhān, one of the cemeteries of Merv.

In *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyya* Subkī provides a relatively long account of Muḥammad ibn Manṣūr, adding a few details to those given by ‘Abd al-Karīm. Like him, he lists various scholars from whom he heard Hadith, though the lists are different. The first he mentions is Abū Sa‘īd ‘Abd al-Wāḥid Qushayrī (d. 1101), a son and successor of the famous Abu’l-Qāsim Qushayrī.

In a brief note on the word Qushayrī in *Ascriptions*, ‘Abd al-Karīm tells us that Abu’l-Qāsim Qushayrī was known for his virtue, knowledge, and renunciation and that he had six sons who transmitted Hadith. He does not mention any of his books, saying only that he had a prominent position in “knowledge” and that he himself had heard Hadith from him by fifteen different intermediaries and from all of his sons by many more intermediaries.⁴³ The specific son who was Muḥammad ibn Manṣūr’s teacher, ‘Abd al-Wāḥid, became the head of the Qushayrī family after his father’s death and took over the post of *khatīb* in the Manī‘ī mosque in Nishapur from Imām al-Ḥaramayn Juwaynī. He served in this post—that is, the person who delivers the *khuṭba* or Friday sermon—for fifteen years. It is said that his father gave him the *kunya* Abū Sa‘īd because the famous Sufi teacher Abū Sa‘īd ibn Abī’l-Khayr (d. 1049) asked that the infant be named after him.⁴⁴ The fact that ‘Abd al-Wāḥid was one of the teachers of Muḥammad Sam‘ānī, who in turn was the primary teacher of his brother Aḥmad, suggests one of the many routes by which Sufism was transmitted to the author of *Repose*.

‘Abd al-Karīm himself had two sons, one of whom, Abu’l-Muẓaffar ‘Abd al-Raḥīm, was born in the year 1143 and became a leading Shafī’i scholar of his generation. He was killed during the Mongol invasion around the turn of the year 1221. The other son, Abū Zayd Muḥammad, seems to have been an official in the court of the king of Khwarazm, since he was sent by him as a messenger to the caliph in Baghdad, presumably seeking aid against the Mongols. The aid was not forthcoming, of course, and Khwarazm fell in 1219–21.⁴⁵

HASAN IBN MANŞŪR

Aḥmad Sam ‘ānī’s second brother, Abū Muḥammad Ḥasan ibn Manşūr (1076–1137), was learned in jurisprudence and stood next in line to his elder brother in their father’s scholarly legacy, but he had a reclusive nature. The attributes that ‘Abd al-Karīm applies to him tell us that he was engaged in the practices of Sufism: renunciation, scrupulosity, constancy in worship and night vigils, cleanliness, luminosity, elegance in old age, and keeping himself away from the people. He barely left his house except for the required congregational prayers. He heard Hadith from a variety of scholars both in Merv and in Nishapur, including ‘Abd al-Wāḥid Qushayrī and Nizām al-Mulk the vizier. His life was cut short when he was strangled by burglars, who had come to steal a valuable trust that had been left with his wife by an official of the Turks. Thus, says ‘Abd al-Karīm, he was granted the “death as a martyr” for which he used to pray.

‘Abd al-Karīm heard a great deal from Ḥasan and mentions among other things two lists of books, including all of his grandfather Manşūr’s lectures and his collection of one thousand hadiths.⁴⁶ Subkī’s account of Ḥasan in *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyya* simply summarizes ‘Abd al-Karīm’s account in *Ascriptions*. Subkī concludes by saying that Ḥasan’s students were ‘Abd al-Karīm “and others,” which is no doubt true, but either the others were not prominent enough to be mentioned in the biographies, or Ḥasan’s role in their education was not especially significant.⁴⁷

In *Abridgement* ‘Abd al-Karīm concludes his description of Ḥasan by quoting two texts that he had heard from him, a hadith and a short Arabic poem, while reminding us that an almost identical hadith is found in both Bukhārī and Muslim: “The most astute of words are those spoken by the poet Labīd: ‘Is not everything other than God unreal?’ And Ibn Abi’l-Ṣalt was almost a Muslim.”⁴⁸ The quote from Labīd is a half line of poetry. Aḥmad cites it three times in *Repose*, not least because it sums up a major theme of his book.

The poem that ‘Abd al-Karīm received from Ḥasan is given an *isnād* going back to the Sufi teacher Aḥmad ibn ‘Aṭā’ Rūdhbārī (d. 980), who introduced it by saying that he thought it was composed by his maternal uncle, that is, Abū ‘Alī Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Rūdhbārī (d. 933), a student of Junayd and other prominent Sufi shaykhs.⁴⁹

When you become a companion of the Men, be a chevalier
as if you are a slave to every friend.

Be sweet and cool for every comrade,
like water for a burning liver.⁵⁰

In Sufism “Men” (*rijāl*) is a term for perfected human beings, and “chevalier” (*fatā*)—which means literally “young man”—connotes perfect generosity and self-sacrifice.⁵¹ In *The Repose of the Spirits* Aḥmad repeatedly uses the standard Persian translation of chevalier (*jawān-mard*) to address his readers. Like the word dervish or “poor man,” which he uses in the same way, chevalier suggests the character traits that one needs to cultivate in the path to God.

‘Abd al-Karīm also provides two accounts of Ḥasan’s son, Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad (ca. 1100–39). In *Abridgement* he speaks of him with the deference one would expect toward a teacher: “He was an erudite youth, a knower of lexicography, prose, and poetry; delicate in nature, quick to compose poetry, with beautiful poetry in the two tongues, Arabic and Persian, a rare individual. He heard from his father and a group of shaykhs the like of whom has not been seen.” These shaykhs included his uncle Muḥammad, Muḥammad Sawṣaqānī,⁵² and the brothers Faḍl and Khalaf Kākū’ī.⁵³ The Kākū’ī brothers seem to have been family friends; ‘Abd al-Karīm says that his father Muḥammad heard a great deal from Faḍl Kākū’ī and that he himself received much from him by way of Faḍl’s son and two daughters and his uncle Aḥmad.⁵⁴ He goes on to say that in conversations with his cousin he wrote down some of his poetry and the poetry of others. In his account of his own family in *Ascriptions*, he praises his cousin’s knowledge of literature but adds an apology: “He busied himself with something that his forebears did not, namely sitting with youths and girls in their pastimes and conforming with them in what they were doing. May God overlook us and him!”⁵⁵ One suspects that Muḥammad was on good terms with his uncle Aḥmad, since the two shared a love for literature.

AḤMAD IBN MANṢŪR

This brings us to Abu’l-Qāsim Aḥmad (1094–1140), author of *The Repose of the Spirits*. When his father died in 1096, Aḥmad was two. He was adopted by his brother Muḥammad, who was twenty-three at the time and soon became his teacher in Hadith and jurisprudence. Muḥammad’s daughter Ḥurra was born two years later, so she would have been a sister to Aḥmad. His two nephews, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and ‘Abd al-Karīm, joined the family thirteen and fifteen years later, so both he and Ḥurra would have been involved in their education.

In describing his uncle, ‘Abd al-Karīm says that he was an imam, a scholar (that is, of Hadith), a debater (*munāẓir*), a Quran commentator (*mufassir*), a mufti, a protector of the Shafi’i school, a composer of beautiful poetry in both Arabic and Persian, and a homilist (*wā‘iz*) whose elegant homilies were full of benefits and fine points. He was dignified, sedate, modest, generous, firm, forbearing, patient, and unblemished in soul. He spent all of his time gaining knowledge and imparting knowledge. When his brother Muḥammad died, Aḥmad was twenty-three. He took over from him in all that he had delegated to him, by which ‘Abd al-Karīm presumably means teaching in the madrasa and leading prayers in the mosque.⁵⁶ As we will see later, the madrasa in question seems to have been the Niẓāmiyya.

Aḥmad heard Hadith from various teachers besides his brother Muḥammad. ‘Abd al-Karīm lists Muḥammad Māhānī, Kāmkar the litterateur (*adīb*), and the brothers Ismā‘il Nāqīdī (d. ca. 1100) and ‘Abd al-Jabbār Nāqīdī (d. 1114). In *Abridgement* ‘Abd al-Karīm

mentions only one of these scholars as his own shaykh, namely, ‘Abd al-Jabbār Nāqidī. He received a license from him, however, in December 1113 when he was about ten months old; it was procured for him by Muḥammad Daqqāq (d. 1122), who is mentioned as having acquired licenses for him from a number of other shaykhs when he was an infant.⁵⁷ In *Ascriptions* ‘Abd al-Karīm provides brief accounts of both Nāqidīs, adding that his uncle Aḥmad narrated to him from Ismā‘īl.⁵⁸ As for Muḥammad Māhānī, ‘Abd al-Karīm mentions him in *Abridgement* as a transmitter of Hadith to several of his own shaykhs, usually along with his father Muḥammad and/or Daqqāq, suggesting that these three were on close terms. He mentions several times that Kāmkār was the teacher in a *maktab* (a grammar school). In his history of Nishapur, Fārisī has a section on Kāmkār in which he says that he was one of the scholars who accompanied Manṣūr when he was exiled from Merv and who returned along with him.⁵⁹

‘Abd al-Karīm tells us that Aḥmad traveled with his brother Muḥammad to Nishapur and heard Hadith from ‘Abd al-Ghaffār Shīruwī and others.⁶⁰ The mention of a trip with his brother to see Shīruwī most likely means that Aḥmad was present with his two nephews in the session of 1116, shortly before the deaths of Shīruwī and Muḥammad. It also suggests that the others from whom he heard in Nishapur included ‘Ubayd Qushayrī (d. 1118), the second person mentioned as having imparted Hadith to his nephews in that city. The biographies mention that ‘Ubayd, like Shīruwī, was a merchant who transmitted Hadith (with no connection to the famous Qushayrī family).⁶¹

When Muḥammad died, the welfare of his two young sons was put in the hands of Ibrāhīm ‘Aṭā’ī (d. 1141), who had been a student of his father Manṣūr. After listing some of the scholars from whom Ibrāhīm heard Hadith, ‘Abd al-Karīm adds, “I heard a great deal from him. Before his death my father delegated watching over my best interests and those of my brother to him, making him the executor of his will. Ibrāhīm did that beautifully and arranged our affairs in the most beautiful arrangement.”⁶² At the same time, ‘Abd al-Karīm’s primary teacher in jurisprudence was his uncle Aḥmad, from whom he also heard Hadith, took notes on issues in disputation (*khilāf*), and learned the Shafi‘ī school. He traveled with him to Sarakhs, perhaps to visit relatives of his mother.⁶³ In 1135, when Aḥmad was forty-two and ‘Abd al-Karīm twenty-three, they traveled together to Nishapur. ‘Abd al-Karīm refers to this journey as the reason for ending his studies with his guardian Ibrāhīm. As he puts it, “An affair of importance came up for me with my uncle the imam,” that is, this trip.⁶⁴

‘Abd al-Karīm tells us that he initiated the trip to Nishapur with the aim of hearing two important books in Hadith, the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim from Muḥammad Furāwī (d. 1136) and the *Kitāb al-tawakkul* of Ibn Khuzayma from Hibatallāh Sayyidī (d. 1138). He and Aḥmad were accompanied by Maḥmūd Dabbūsī, who had been ‘Abd al-Karīm’s schoolmate from childhood. Together the two had studied jurisprudence with Aḥmad and heard Hadith from, among others, the famous Sufi teacher Yūsuf Hamadānī (d. 1140). In Nishapur they attended the sessions of Furāwī, Sayyidī, and ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Qushayrī (d. 1138), the youngest son of Abu’l-Qāsim. Dabbūsī, however, became ill and could not continue in the company of ‘Abd al-Karīm, so he returned to Merv.⁶⁵

The biographical literature accords Muḥammad Furāwī an honored place among Hadith-transmitters. Subkī gives him a relatively long notice in *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyya*, saying among other things that he was raised among Sufis and was unique in his time for the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim,

meaning that his *isnād* was the “most elevated” to be found. He would have been about eighty-five years of age when Aḥmad and ‘Abd al-Karīm attended his sessions. Subkī quotes several statements about him from ‘Abd al-Karīm, including this: “He was an imam, a mufti, a debater, and a homilist. He had beautiful character traits and good manners. He often smiled, and he honored strangers. I did not see his like among my shaykhs.”⁶⁶

Although ‘Abd al-Karīm does not provide a notice for Furāwī in either of his two published books, he does have a notice for Furāwī’s daughter Sharīfa (d. 1141–42), for whom he lists many teachers. It is not unlikely that he attended her sessions along with Aḥmad. He wrote a number of texts at her dictation, including *al-Arba‘ūn* (Forty [Hadiths]) by Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Sulamī (d. 1021). Sulamī was the author of *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* (The Generations of the Sufis), one of the earliest works on the biographies of Sufis, as well as one of the earliest explicitly Sufi commentaries on the Quran, *Ḥaqā’iq al-tafsīr* (The Realities of Exegesis).⁶⁷

In *Abridgement* ‘Abd al-Karīm tells us that the other teacher he wanted to hear in Nishapur, Hibatallāh Sayyidī, was the son-in-law of Imām al-Ḥaramayn Juwaynī. He was learned and pious, but he was hard in character, always scowling, and did not like Hadith-transmitters. ‘Abd al-Karīm goes on to say that he thinks no one heard as much as he did from him and then provides a rather long list of books on Hadith and biography.⁶⁸

When ‘Abd al-Karīm went to Nishapur with Aḥmad in 1135, it seems that he had no intention of returning with him to Merv, but it was not easy to convince his uncle to let him stay. Most likely a great deal of give-and-take lies behind this statement of ‘Abd al-Karīm: “My uncle aimed to return to Merv, but I stayed behind in hiding so that I might reside in Nishapur after he left. He waited until I appeared, and I returned with him as far as Tus. Then he gave me permission to return to Nishapur, and he himself went back to Merv.” ‘Abd al-Karīm remained in Nishapur for a year and then went on to Isfahan and from there to Baghdad, where he was informed that Aḥmad had died in the town of Idrīqād on 17 Shawwāl 534 (5 June 1140). He was carried back to Merv and buried next to his father.⁶⁹ It was also in Baghdad that ‘Abd al-Karīm heard that his guardian Ibrāhīm had been killed during a raid on Merv by forces from Khwarazm.⁷⁰

‘Abd al-Karīm mentions Aḥmad in passing in a few accounts of other shaykhs. For example, he tells us that the scholar Ḥusayn Lāmishī, who was known for his knowledge of disputation and Kalam, came to Merv and stayed in the Ribāt al-Sultān. “I was taken to him along with my brother ‘Abd al-Waḥhāb. At the time I was nine years old. He acted humbly toward us and honored us greatly. We listened along with him as my uncle Aḥmad read a copy of the hadiths of Abū Makīs Dīnār ibn ‘Abdallāh narrated from Anas ibn Mālik.”⁷¹ This would have been in the year 1122, so Aḥmad would have been twenty-eight.

‘Abd al-Karīm describes another meeting in the year 1133 or 1134, when he was twenty-two and Aḥmad forty-one. He says that ‘Umar Baṣṭāmī came to Merv and sat in the Khān al-Barāzīn to give a homily. During the talk he mentioned the name Abū Sulaymān Dārā’ī, a well-known Sufi teacher. Aḥmad corrected him by saying “Dārānī.” Then ‘Abd al-Karīm recounts, “Right in front of them I said, ‘Both this and that are correct, for when a word’s *alif* in the last place is *maqṣūra*, one may choose in making the ascription to add the *nūn* or leave it out. Thus we have Dārānī and Dārā’ī, and we have Ṣan‘ānī and Ṣan‘ā’ī.’ My uncle stayed silent and said nothing.”⁷² Clearly, ‘Abd al-Karīm was proud of his youthful prowess in Arabic grammar.

‘Abd al-Karīm refers to Aḥmad several times in *Abridgement* as “my uncle the imam.” We can be sure that he means Aḥmad and not Ḥasan because, in the smaller number of instances where he mentions Ḥasan, he refers to him either by name or with the title *shahīd*, “the martyr.” In one of these accounts, he mentions that Aḥmad taught at the Niẓāmiyya Madrasa and that he himself would repeat the lessons for those who needed help. The account pertains to one Fakhrāwar Rāzī, for whom ‘Abd al-Karīm provides no dates other than that they met in 1134, that is, the year before he left with Aḥmad for Nishapur. He writes, “He was an erudite jurist who came to Merv and dwelt with us in the Niẓāmiyya Madrasa. During the lessons of my uncle the imam, he and I used to repeat [the lessons for other students].” ‘Abd al-Karīm then tells us that Fakhrāwar had heard the book *Ḥilyat al-awliyā*’ (The Adornment of the Friends) by Abū Nu‘aym Iṣfahānī (d. 1038) from Ḥasan Ḥaddād in Isfahan (who had heard the book from Abū Nu‘aym himself), and that he read with him one or two of its folios.⁷³ *Ḥilyat al-awliyā*’ is a ten-volume account of the friends of God, beginning with the Prophet and his Companions and coming down to recent times. It is one of the main sources of information on teachers who were known as or came to be seen as Sufis in retrospect. Abū Nu‘aym was a prolific author of books on Hadith. *Ḥilyat al-awliyā*’ is one of only two books that Aḥmad mentions by name in *The Repose of the Spirits*, the other being the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī.

In an account of Qāḍī Ḥassān Ṭūsī (b. ca. 1068), ‘Abd al-Karīm again mentions Aḥmad and shows a sense of humor. He says that Qāḍī Ḥassān studied jurisprudence in Merv with his grandfather Maṣṣūr, who took to him and kept him near. ‘Abd al-Karīm met him first in Tus, then in Nishapur, and then studied with him in Jāgharq (a village located between Tus and Nishapur), hearing from him three or four sessions of his grandfather’s lectures. The two became close: “Among him, me, and my uncle the imam were kinship and great intimacy, like what he had with my grandfather.” Then, he says:

One day in Tus a group of us were going to a gathering and banquet. I said to my uncle the imam—God have mercy on him—“Let us first visit the graves of the shaykhs, then we will take in the gathering.” and he concurred. So we went on and as we were passing the house of the host, Qāḍī Ḥassān said, “Masters, let us first enter this house and eat what we have been invited to, for it will disappear, but visiting will not disappear, for the dead do not depart from their graves.” The whole group laughed, and we did what he said.⁷⁴

Another of ‘Abd al-Karīm’s teachers was ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Bārṇābādihī, an erudite jurist and debater who was scrupulous in practice and much devoted to Quran recitation and prayer. “For a time he took over the Friday sermons as the deputy for my uncle the imam. He had studied jurisprudence with my grandfather the imam Maṣṣūr. Then he went to Bukhara and saw the imams there. He went on to Tus and stayed for a time with Muḥammad Ghazālī, and then for a time with Ḥusayn Baghawī. . . . I wrote a little from him before I left on my journey.”⁷⁵ Baghawī (d. 1122) was the author of several books, the best known of which is his commentary on the Quran, *Ma‘ālim al-tanzīl*.

‘Abd al-Karīm makes another reference to his trip to Nishapur with his uncle in an account of Aḥmad Maṣjidi. He writes, “He was the first shaykh from whom I heard Hadith in Nishapur.

I recall that when we entered Nishapur, he came to greet my uncle the imam and introduced himself by saying, ‘I am the son of Sahl Masjidi.’”⁷⁶

Apparently the only other mentions of Aḥmad by someone who actually met him are found in two books by Ibn ‘Asākir, the author of the huge *Tārīkh madīna Dimashq* (History of the City of Damascus). Born in Damascus in 1106, Ibn ‘Asākir studied at the Nizāmiyya Madrasa in Baghdad, left for the East around 1133, became a friend and traveling companion of ‘Abd al-Karīm, and returned to Damascus in 1139. Concerning him ‘Abd al-Karīm writes, “My dear friend and comrade, Abu’l-Qāsim ‘Alī ibn Ḥasan ibn Hibatallāh, the hafiz and Shafi’i from Damascus, collected the city’s history in keeping with the stipulations of the Hadith-transmitters.”⁷⁷ In at least fourteen instances in *History of the City of Damascus*, Ibn ‘Asākir mentions that he received a hadith from Aḥmad ibn Maṣṣūr Sam‘ānī, to whom he gives the title “jurist” in the first mention.⁷⁸ In practically all of these instances, Aḥmad’s role was to narrate hadiths from the already mentioned ‘Abd al-Ghaffār Shīruwī. Aḥmad would have heard these when he visited Nishapur along with his brother Muḥammad and his two nephews in the year 1116.

Ibn ‘Asākir begins each passage in which Aḥmad is mentioned by saying that Shīruwī “wrote” the hadith “to me” (*katāba ilayya*), which might be understood to mean that he wrote out a license specifically for him, but he also says that Aḥmad Sam‘ānī “reported” (*akhbara*) the hadith from Shīruwī, which would mean that Aḥmad recited the hadith from a written document, presumably the license that he himself received from Shīruwī. Ibn ‘Asākir could not have received the hadiths directly from Shīruwī because Shīruwī died when he was eleven years old, long before he set out on his travels. In all of these hadiths, the *isnād* goes by way of Abū Bakr ibn Ḥasan Ḥīrī (d. 1030), a well-known Shafi’i judge in Nishapur and one of Shīruwī’s teachers. ‘Abd al-Karīm mentions that Shīruwī was the last living person to have a direct link to Ḥīrī.⁷⁹

None of the hadiths that Ibn ‘Asākir heard from Aḥmad are mentioned in *The Repose of the Spirits*, nor is their content in any way suggestive of Aḥmad’s specific concerns in his book. In this respect they are in marked contrast to a single hadith Ibn ‘Asākir narrates from him in his *Mu‘jam al-shuyūkh* (Lexicon of Shaykhs), which enumerates 1,621 individuals. Unlike ‘Abd al-Karīm in his lexicon of shaykhs, Ibn ‘Asākir provides no information about his teachers other than their names. In each case he mentions one hadith (with *isnād*) that he heard from the shaykh in question. One can surmise that each hadith reflects the personality or specific concerns of the shaykh. It certainly does so in the case of Aḥmad. After providing Aḥmad’s full name followed by the title “jurist,” Ibn ‘Asākir cites the following hadith, which Aḥmad received from Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad ibn Abī Ja‘far Ḥammāmī in Merv: The Companion Abū Mūsā said, “O Messenger of God, a man loves people and joining with them.” The Prophet replied, “A man will be with those he loves.”⁸⁰ We will see that Ibn ‘Asākir also associates ‘Abd al-Karīm specifically with love.

The later biographical literature takes little notice of Aḥmad. This is not surprising in books about Hadith-transmitters and jurists, given that, on the evidence of *The Repose of the Spirits*, Aḥmad’s primary concern was not transmitting Hadith or teaching jurisprudence but rather opening up students to the inner dimension of Islamic learning. As for why his name was not remembered in Sufi circles, this remains a puzzle; no doubt it has something to do with the failure of his book to be widely disseminated, perhaps because of the Mongol invasion. It may also be

connected to the dominance of Shi'ism in Iran from the sixteenth century onward, when books by Sunni scholars were often ignored.

Subkī's account of Aḥmad in *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyya* adds nothing to what 'Abd al-Karīm says in *Ascriptions*.⁸¹ We do learn from him, however, that Aḥmad had a son by the name of Abū Bakr Muḥammad, to whom Subkī dedicates a separate entry. He takes his information from *Ta'rikh Khwārazm* by Maḥmūd Khwārazmī (d. 1173), who was the author of a book called *al-Kāfi* in jurisprudence. Khwārazmī's account of Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad suggests that he followed in his father's footsteps as a propagator of the religion of love. Given that this is apparently the only mention of Aḥmad's son in the literature, it is likely that he, like the sons of 'Abd al-Karīm, perished in the Mongol invasion. Notice that Muḥammad was outstanding in "reminder," like his father and grandfather:

Said the author of *al-Kāfi* in *Ta'rikh Khwārazm*, "He was a youth of elevated rank among the leading men of Khorasan. He was among those unique at the time in subtlety of exposition and eloquence of tongue, and he had no equal in reminder. He came to Khwārazm twice, narrating Hadith on the authority of his father. He was the son of 'Abd al-Karīm's paternal uncle.

"I heard him say from the pulpit, 'Guard your oaths just as you guard the turban on your head! Do not let your turbans be more exalted in your sight than your oaths!' Or something like that, for he mentioned it in Persian and I have translated it.

"He also composed a poem [in Arabic] while on the pulpit, saying,

Once a modest maid from Iraq
 stopped for a moment at Bāb al-Ṭāq,⁸²
 A girl of thirteen or fourteen,
 the death of this enthralled yearner.
 I said, "Who are you, O captivator?" She said,
 "I come from the Creator's gentle art.
 "Be not forward with me, for my fingers
 are stained with my lovers' blood."⁸³

Those familiar with Sufi literature will hardly be shocked by this imagery. The goal of lovers is to achieve "union" with their Beloved. Given that two can never be one, the Beloved must "shed the lover's blood" to erase the duality. Aḥmad frequently speaks of being killed by the Beloved, as in this Persian line: "No matter how You kill me, I come to life! // But don't kill me with separation—anything but that" (6).

Sufism in Aḥmad's Khorasan

"Sufism" is a difficult if not impossible word to define. Some historians take an easy way out and say that it is mysticism and then continue on as if they had explained something. But what exactly is mysticism? And why exactly are Sufis mystics? What are the precise characteristics that

make one person a mystic and another a jurist, one a Sufi and another a sociologist? And if mysticism can be defined as modern-day scholars define it, how could that definition have been in the minds of those who talked about Sufism one thousand years ago? Other possible translations, such as “esotericism” or “spirituality,” run into similar problems. In fact the primary texts are not clear as to what the words Sufi and Sufism mean, nor is there much evidence that those who used the words at various times and places had a single meaning in mind.⁸⁴

The general picture that one might get from studying Western accounts (and many Muslim accounts as well) is that whatever the word Sufism designates, the phenomenon itself is inconsistent with—perhaps even hostile to—mainstream, “orthodox” Islam. When we look at criticism of Sufism in the primary literature, disagreements on religious issues often turn out to be driven by political and social factors of a local sort, as historians are wont to explain when they do in fact investigate actual situations.⁸⁵ My own attempt to understand the religious and social environment in which Aḥmad Sam‘ānī lived has led me to believe that his family represents a case study in one of the major themes of Ahmet Karamustafa’s book *Sufism: The Formative Period*. As he puts it in one passage, “In the eyes of many traditionalists,” that is, Hadith-transmitters, “irrespective of their pietistic orientation, Sufism was utterly mainstream.”⁸⁶

Given that it is not clear how the term Sufism was understood during Sam‘ānī’s time (or any other time), I need to clarify my own frequent mentions of the word. I use it first because the texts employ it. If I am not translating or commenting on a specific passage where the word is used, I use it to designate a broad trend among Muslims, clearly present in the Quran, the Prophet, and some of his Companions, to stress the inner meaning over the outward form, to insist that every act should be done while keeping God foremost in mind, and to hold that outward adherence to doctrine and ritual is not efficacious unless it is accompanied by the intention to purify oneself from everything of which God disapproves. In this broad sense Sufism has no necessary connection with “mysticism.” It simply designates the general contours of *iḥsān* or “beautiful-doing” as this term is employed in the Quran and the Hadith, especially in the famous Hadith of Gabriel, where *iḥsān* is contrasted with *islām* (“submission” through outward acts) and *īmān* (“faith” through understanding and conviction).⁸⁷ This description of Sufism is broad enough to embrace what the Sam‘ānīs and their contemporaries meant when they used the word, but it is not specific enough to describe exactly what they had in mind in any given instance.

It bears repeating that there is no generally accepted definition of Sufism offered by the classical authorities or modern scholars. In books by authors whom Aḥmad Sam‘ānī certainly read—like Qushayrī and Abū Nu‘aym Iṣfahānī—the word is given a variety of interpretations. In general it designates an advanced station on the path to God or an exalted state of mind achieved by travelers on the path. Numerous aphorisms are cited to describe it, but none of them is anything like a definition. Rather, each needs to be taken as an “allusion” (*ishāra*) to a state of mind and heart. The teachers who uttered these sayings were attempting to help their students escape from the limitations of habit and blind belief so that they could see things for themselves.

Aḥmad himself rarely mentions the words Sufi or Sufism. To be precise, he does so in eleven instances, nine of which are quotations. Nonetheless, it seems fair to call *The Repose of the Spirits* a Sufi text inasmuch as it focuses on the inner life of Muslims rather than the outward forms of

their beliefs and practices. As Aḥmad puts it in one of the two mentions of Sufism that is not a quotation, “Have you seen a lotus flower? You must learn Sufism from it. It has a radiant outwardness and an inwardness in the cape of humbleness. It has the blue coat of grief on the inside and green on the outside. A dervish must be like that. He must wear the tattered cloak on his heart, not his body” (179). “The tattered cloak,” *khirqa*, was a garb adopted by certain Sufis or “dervishes”—that is, followers of the path of spiritual poverty—as a sign of their detachment from the worldly aims of society. But the cloak per se meant nothing if not accompanied by detachment from everything that pulls away from God. In the same way, the turbans and robes of the scholars tell us nothing about the learning and intentions of those who wear them.

Although he rarely uses the word Sufism, Aḥmad often talks about the Islamic tradition in terms of Shariah and Tariqah (and/or Haqiqah). In discussing the significance of the divine name Aware (*khabīr*), for example, he says that the seeker who knows that God is aware of all things will assign watchfulness (*murāqaba*) to his own states. “He will not take one breath without the permission of the Shariah and the Tariqah. He will weigh his outwardness in the scales of the Shariah and pull his inwardness into the playing field of the Haqiqah.” The seeker does not stop there, however, since those who truly follow in the Prophet’s footsteps will detach themselves from everything other than God. This is why, the shaykhs maintain, “The felicitous person is he who has an outwardness conforming to the Shariah, an inwardness following the Haqiqah, and a secret core quit of relying on his Shariah and his Haqiqah” (201).

The word Tariqah is well known in the secondary literature because Sufis have commonly been understood as members of specific organizations called by this name. In this context the word is usually translated as “order” rather than path (on the model of monastic orders). Historians acknowledge that clearly demarcated Tariqahs did not appear until around the sixth/twelfth century, even though there were numerous individuals before that time who were recognized as Sufi teachers. What may have differentiated these early Sufi teachers from shaykhs in other fields of learning like Hadith and jurisprudence was that some of their close students were “disciples” (*murīd*) who had entered into a compact of allegiance with them on the model of “the compact of God’s approval” (*bay‘at al-riḍwān*), which was made with the Prophet by the Companions at Ḥudaybiyya (referred to in Quran 48:10 and 48:18). The Sufi shaykh, often called the master (*ustādh*), had the duty of training (*tarbiya*) disciples by guiding them on the path to God, and the disciples had the duty of obeying the master’s instructions. Books like Qushayrī’s *Treatise* provide a good deal of information on specific teachers who came to be known as Sufis, along with the instructions that they gave to their disciples and their descriptions of the path leading to the divine presence. But as Qushayrī often reminds us, each of these teachers spoke from his own standpoint. As he says in discussing the important technical term *ma‘rifā*, “recognition” (usually translated as “gnosis”), “Each of the shaykhs spoke about what occurred for himself and alluded to what he found in his own present moment [*waqt*].”⁸⁸

At the time of Aḥmad Sam‘ānī, Sufism in the sense of instruction in the Tariqah and the Haqiqah could be found everywhere in society, not least in teaching institutions such as mosques and madrasas. It was simply a standard part of mainstream learning.⁸⁹ It is enough to read through ‘Abd al-Karīm’s mentions of the teachers whom he designates as Sufis to see that they