

## Sufism and Its Literary Contributions in Yemen: Ahmad Ibn Alwan a Model

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### Abstract

This research paper explores the concept of Sufism, its genesis, growth and its most prominent Sufi schools, in the Arabian Peninsula in general and in Yemen, in particular. It precisely unearths the rise of the Sufi Movement in Yemen from early time of Ayyubids until now. It further sheds light on the renowned Yemeni Sufi Scholar, Ahmad ibn Alwan and his literary contribution to the establishment of Sufism in Yemen in the early twelfth century. It further tackles his philosophy in his very well-known book *al-Tawheed al-A'zam (The Supreme Union)* which forms the basic ground of his Sufi path (Tariqa). The question of how Ibn Alwan is unique from other Sufi scholars in terms of his literary contributions investigated. Building on a descriptive and analytical approach, the paper attempts to investigate an interesting area which is rarely studied if not ignored or neglected by the researchers. It is concluded that Ibn Alwan is not influenced by any Sufi school and that his ideas and contributions to Sufism and literary Sufism bestows Sufism in Yemen a unique privacy.

**Key words:** Ahmad Ibn Alwan; Sufism; Sufi Literary Schools; Yemen

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### INTRODUCTION

God is not in a place, specified for Him, and is not in a time, specified for Him, but He has chosen from all the places, the hearts of knowers (qulūb al-‘ārifīn) and from all the times, the times of those who remember Him. (adh-dhākīrīn.) Ahmad Ibn Alwan. (Aziz, 2011, p.69)

Etymologically, Sufism is a term derived from the Arabic word ‘souf’ meaning ‘wool’. It refers to the clothes woven from wool and generally worn by the early mystics who come to be known as Sufis. A Sufi is “a mystic, if by mystic we mean a person who strives towards intimate knowledge or communion with God; through contemplation, meditation or “inner-vision”<sup>1</sup>. In a simple term, Sufism can best be defined as a pathway followed by individuals who live in accordance with the requirements of God’s knowledge and love; and experience its spiritual delight. It refers to a spiritual journey towards God in quest of everlasting mystical union and purification of one’s soul from vices and earthy greed. Mystic and Sufi followers devote their whole life for the sake of God’s forgiveness and friendliness. They are usually called “Awli’a” or God’s friends, who strongly believe in the saintly miracles (Karamat).

In broader sense, Seyed Mustafa Azmayesh, in his book, *The Teachings of a Sufi Master*, defines Sufism as

a set of personal practices - though rarely practiced collectively in small groups designed to help the follower develop hidden and unexploited capacities, with the goal of developing knowledge of the self and the visible and invisible world, and guiding the seeker or “traveler” along the spiritual path, and ultimately acquiring truths of his existence and a certain vision of the world.<sup>2</sup>

In the same context, Sufism was not known in

<sup>1</sup> Hussain, Z. (1998). A paper presented to Dominion Lodge No 117 A. F. & A.M. G.R.A. On 11th February 1998 (p.3). Retrieved from <http://muslimcanada.org/sufi/introductionsufism.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Azmayesh, Seyed Mustafa. *The Teachings of a Sufi Master*. Simorgh Sufi Society, p.14. Printed.

the early eras of Islam; neither in its name, nor in its characteristics. Early companions and successors of Prophet Mohammed PBUH were but pious, ascetics, devoted to sincere worship and faith. What we see of Sufism nowadays, completely contradicts the principles of Islam and prophet's Sunnah. Contemporary Sufi method is mixed with many prohibited innovations, misled and false practices. It stands on heretic claims of (Karamat) or saintly miracles. These claims are totally opposed to the soul of both Islam and real Sufism. The core of Islam is neither different nor inadequate to meet what the Sufi people wish to be. Islam is a divine message to guide people to the right path, purify their deeds, decrease their sins and increase the relationship between the Creator and His creatures.

## 1. THE GENESIS OF SUFISM

Many thinkers and religious scholars date Sufism back to the early days of Islam. Others consider it as the soul of Islam as it calls for piety, mysticism, humility, and asceticism or "Zuhd". They urge that the central doctrine of the Sufi is divine love and complete obedience to God's commands and orders. The characteristics that unified them are fasting, abstinence from meat and wealth, and wearing coarse wool, the latter becomes a dominant characteristic of Islamic asceticism by the third/ninth century, and later exponents of the Sufi movement considered it to be one of the defining practices of Sufism. However, "Orientalists have expressed various opinions concerning the origins of Sufism. Some authors argue that it was influenced by Greek philosophy, others have asserted that Sufism is derived from Vedanta<sup>3</sup> or Buddhism".<sup>4</sup>

Anyway, Mohammad Ali Aziz, in his book titled *Religion and Mysticism in Early Islam: Theology and Sufism in Yemen- The Legacy of Ahmed Ibn Alwan*, asserts that

the Literary evidence shows that the term "Sufism" was not in circulation until the first half of the third/ninth century. The preceding period witnessed the emergence and the rapid spread of various groups of Islamic ascetics (zuhhād) and devout men (nussāk). Although the Prophet and some of his companions were often portrayed in Sufi literature as the first Sufis, the actual founder of theosophical Sufism was the Nubian Dhū'n-Nūn al-Misri (d. 245/860) (Aziz, 2011, p.36)".

As a spiritual religious concept, Sufism of that time

<sup>3</sup> Vedanta or Uttara Mīmāṃsā is one of the six orthodox schools of Hindu Philosophy. The term veda means "knowledge" and anta means "end", and originally referred to the classical Upanishads, a collection of foundational texts in Hinduism. Vedanta also refers to various philosophical traditions based on the three basic texts of Hindu philosophy, namely the *Principal Upanishads*, the *Brahma Sutras* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. (English Wikipedia. *The free Encyclopedia*).

<sup>4</sup> <http://muslimcanada.org/sufi/introductionsufism.htm>

up until and/or after the time of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (505 A.D.) around the 12th/13th centuries was practical Sufism. "The 12th and 13th centuries were the birth of Philosophical Sufism. And it has been the latter that has done more to damage the pristine image of Sufism and its reality and true teachings (Ali, p.5)". Although Sufis are relatively few in number, they have established their own schools, doctrine and philosophy. Down the ages, Sufis contribute immensely to Islamic literature. For example, Maulana Jalulu Ddin al-Rumi, Rabi'a Al-Adawyyah, Omar al-Khayyām, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and many others whose influence extended beyond Muslim lands. "They were influential in spreading Islam particularly to the furthest outposts of the Muslim world in Africa, India and the Far East".<sup>5</sup> Many contemporary scholars admit that the most notable Sufi Thinker theologian and philosopher was Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, who lived in Syria around 1100 AD.

His famous treatises *The Reconstruction of Religious Sciences*, *the Alchemy of Happiness* and other works set off to convince the Islamic world that Sufism and its teachings originated from the Qur'an and were compatible with mainstream Islamic thought and theology. It was al-Ghazali who bridged the gap between traditional and mystical Islam. It was around 1000 AD that the early Sufi literature, in the form of manuals, treatises, discourses, and poetry, became the source of Sufi thinking and meditations.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, Sufism in Iraq flourished due to the influence of Abdul Qadir Al-Jailani, the most prominent Sufi master of the day, who established what comes to be known the Qadiryah way of Sufism. Other prominent Sufi thinkers emerged in Persia, Turkey, India and different parts of the Islamic world. These Sufi Movements believed that

They had twofold aims: to make their own spiritual peace and to serve the mankind. Sufism, which started as a reform movement, laid emphasis on free-thinking, liberal ideas and pertinence. They believed in the equality of all human beings and unity of man. Their concept of unity, brotherhood and the humanitarian ideas of the Sufi saints were so fascinating. (Chautary, 2015, p.139)

## 2. SUFISM IN YEMEN

In Yemen, as elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula and Islamic world, Sufism began with prominent ascetic manifestations, simple practices and pure thoughts. Those practices were confined to very limited areas in Zabid Tehama, Aljanad Taiz and jibla Ibb cities. There is no evidence that confirms the emergence of Sufism in Yemen till the beginning of the twelfth century. Then, they developed, permeated wider society until Sufism

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/subdivisions/sufism\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/subdivisions/sufism_1.shtml)

<sup>6</sup> <http://muslimcanada.org/sufi/introductionsufism.html>

became a prominent attribute of the Yemeni society at the beginning of the twelfth century. There is no doubt that “the Ayyubids were among the most important factors contributing to the flourishing of Sufism in Yemen.” (Aziz, 2011, p.48). Historians confirm that Ali bin Umar bin Mohammed al-Ahdal (602-1205) and Isa bin Iqbal al-Hattar (606-1209) are the founding mystics of Sufism as a sect in Yemen.

It is worth mentioning that the simple and pure practices and thought of Sufi mystics deviated and hyper asceticism made it a mere innovative movement. Mystic way (tariqa) of Ali al-Ahdal or Isa al-Hattar, the early founding mystics in Yemen, simply looked ambiguous and elusive like the Black Magic art described in many of the Shakespeare and Marlowe’s literary arts such as *Doctor Faustus*. It reflects the dominance of the saints and religious scholars on the socio-political atmosphere where science has no place at all. It further reflects a state of the total dominance of fables, heresies, mysticisms and so on that have dominated the Yemeni society in particular and the whole Muslim societies in general at that period of time. One of the very famously reported stories, though long, of how, for example, ibn al-Ahdal became saint is that:

Al-Ahdal predicted that a certain man of his village who worked with the authorities would die that night. The man and his family spent the night in agony. Some people told them to pay alms so that God might rescue him. They paid fifteen dinars, a considerable sum at that time. In the morning, the man came to pray with the shaykh, and the people awaited the shaykh’s words. Al-Ahdal then sent one of his disciples to the man’s house and instructed him to fold up a straw mat, which the man had slept on, and to speak to the snake beneath it to answer the call of the shaykh. The disciple implemented the order of the shaykh. The snake came crawling with the disciple to the shaykh’s house and put its head on the shaykh’s prayer rug. Al-Ahdal put his hand on its head and said: “The appointed time of death (ajal) was decreed tonight upon this man, but fifteen dinars were paid in alms-giving and therefore God has extended his life fifteen years.” He then addressed the snake, “But he is yours and you are his.” After fifteen years, the same snake killed the man while he was irrigating his land. (Aziz, p.48)

The dominant belief at that time up till recent period is that those holy men are medium between God and people; and miracles are a demand of their communities. God will not reply the supplications, recover the patients or descends rains unless those mystics are present and perform it themselves. If any attempts made by other ordinary people using the same techniques the holy men use, the result will not be the same. By this, people believe in saintly miracles of those mystics. Above that “when one looks back at this miracle, one has to remember that it took place at a time when miracles were eulogized and thus should not be judged by our contemporary standards”. (Aziz, p.48). Despite the hyperbolic stories of Sufi thinkers like Ali Bin Umar al-Ahdal (602-1205) or Isa ibn Iqbal al-Hattar (606-1209) which were grounded on more fables than truth, however, Yemen witnessed a swift

growth of Sufism, both practically and philosophically. There appeared many prominent Sufi thinkers like Ahmad ibn Alwan (d. 665/1266), Abu al-Ghayth b. Jamil (d. 651/1253), Muhammad b. Ali al-Alawi, known as al-Faqih al-Muqaddam (d. 653/1256) and many other. Here, Ahmad ibn Alwan’s book *The Supreme Union* is the target in the rest of this research.

### 3. AHMAD IBN ALWAN (600-1203)

Abu al-Hasan Ahmad ibn Alwan is probably the most outstanding Yemeni Sufi saint of his time. He was born in Dhu-al Janan village, Jabal Habashi, Taiz city in the middle of Yemen around (600-1203). As per the manuscripts found in the Great Mosque of Sana’a library, Ibn Alwan descends from the Prophet Mohammed PBUH’s family tree. He was well educated and had extensive knowledge about Islam and religious matters. He also studied Arabic language and its grammar. He further mastered theology and fiqh (jurisprudence). His father was in a close relation to the King of Yemen, al-Mas’ud (1228), the son of al-Malik AL-Kamil Sulayman b. Shahinshah (1214) Sultan of Egypt at that time. Ahmad ibn Alwan’s father served as a royal scribe for the king al-Masoud, who remained in power for a round ten years and died in Mecca on his way back to Egypt. Alwan’s father, unfortunately passed away in Hajjah, mountain city situated in the north of Yemen, as a landslide fell on him and caused his death.

After his father’s death, the young Ahmed Ibn Alwan confronted difficult circumstances and shortage of money. He decided to visit the king for the sake of obtaining a job like his father’s. However, on his way to the Sultan, he accidentally exposed to a strange incident or saintly miracle. As narrated by al-Janadi and quoted in Mohammad Ali Aziz’s book entitled, *Religion and Mysticism in Early Islam: Theology and Sufism in Yemen- The Legacy of Ahmed Ibn Alwan*:

He left his village heading to the Sultan’s palace. In the middle of his journey, a green bird landed on his shoulder and extended its beak to his mouth. The sheikh opened his mouth and the bird put something into it, whereupon the sheikh swallowed it. He then returned [to his village] and secluded himself in a spiritual retreat for forty days. Eventually, he came out and knelt on a rock in order to worship God. The rock split and there appeared from it a hand. He then [heard a voice] commanding him to shake the hand. He said: “Who are you?” [The voice] replied: “Abū Bakr.” He shook the hand. The voice said to him: I have appointed you as a shaykh (Nassbtuka shaykhan) (p.53).

Nevertheless, the incident could be authentic or not, it was a turning point in the life of Ibn Alwan. It results in a dramatic change in his life and became worldly creature no more. He devoted his entire life for mysticism, asceticism and zikr (remembrance of God). Shaking hand, as the story tells, with the first Muslim Caliph Abu Bakr is regarded a saintly miracle which never occurs except to

those who are exceptional to God; because these miracles cannot be achieved for anyone without divine power. Thus, Ibn Alwan became Wali (saint) and has been given a great status as an intellectual and spiritual beacon of the Yemeni Sufi people since then.

Ahmad Ibn Alwan's intellectual productions and works remained unknown for centuries because his works were banned by the conservative (Shiite) rulers of Yemen; who took a negative view of Sufism, as it derived its vitality from the Sunni community. Despite his unique presence in the Yemeni folklore and intellectual discourse, it is only quite recently that some of his major literary, theological, and mystical works have been explored, unearthed and republished. After the 1962 Republican Revolution in Yemen, Alwan's works draw the attention of the researchers and elite, both nationally and internationally.

#### 4. AHMAD IBN ALWAN'S LITERARY WORLD

Sheikh Ahmad Ibn Alwan's literary world is distinguished by its profound and obvious meaning. His prose is mingled with poetry in a beautifully transparent style. He employs his literary, linguistic and poetic capacities to serve the idea and mission he believes in. Analysing and reading Ibn Alwan's production from poetry or prose, one will find that it is a reflection of the context of his main task. This means his poetry production is limited to the following purposes: Love and divine knowledge, Advice, Teaching, Preaching and Lamentation. The subject of love and divine knowledge is ranked first in terms of quantity, high level of creativity and mastery in his poetry. Yet, Ibn Alwan doesn't use the amorous symbol employed by other Sufis to express the divine love. On the contrary, he utilizes his own symbol, "Al-howra" (أرواح) in his poetry. This means he has introduced a new symbol to Sufism poetry. "Al -howra" taken from the Holy Quran is used as a symbol of Muhammad truth but not used as a symbol of divine love (for the purpose of infallibility). In fact, the Love of the prophet Muhammad is the Centre of Sufi Life. Due to the fact that, the prophet's love is linked to the love of God, the mystics have granted divine love and prophetic praise special taste and new style in their literary production. Muhammad truth is described as heavenly light by Ibn Alwan as follows:

She is a beautifully white woman as if nobody was created like her before.  
When we saw her, we adored her.  
Her pictures are so amazing.  
Her lover misses her eccentrically.  
(Ibn Alwan ,1995, pp.163-164) (Self Trans.)

The image of "Al-Howrah" appears encircled with incandescent light; It is a picture taken from the world of the divine light.

Lights spread once she moves.  
Like the sun when it twinkles much.  
She walks gorgeously and proudly.  
Her beauty doesn't need wearing earrings.  
(Ibn Alwan, 1995, p.34) (Self Trans.)

However, the symbol of wine is used to express the divine love because it does not affect the principle of infallibility.

Taste oh my lover the love of the beloved  
From the wine of my glass [which] is hidden and untouched  
Wine is my gaze and intoxication is my word  
I rule over people with the kdf  
Nun (Cited as Aziz, p.166)

Drinking from the wine of the divine love is not easy for everyone; no one can reach one sip of it except those who devote their lives to God. In this matter, Alwan says:

We drank from the wine, of which you can't drink  
Offer prayer, prostrate, and come closer to God and you might drink out of which.  
(Ibn Alwan,1995, p.413) (Self Trans.)

The wine here is nothing but the moment of remembrance of God that cherishes the loving by mentioning his beloved (love of God). The wine of Sufism awakens the soul and refreshes the conscience. The wine here is a symbol of divine love.

So how do not I become delighted due to His dhikr  
And drag the tails [of my garments and enjoy] the intoxication in Him.  
He is the one who planted in me an aromatic plant.  
And irrigated it by the intoxication from His wine.  
So do not blame me if I am addicted to [His] love  
Because this issue [comes] from His command.  
(Cited as Aziz, 2004, p.139)

From the above mentioned lines it seems that Ibn Alwan's poetry is a musical attraction if it is colored with beautiful melodies. It turns into a popular song or a symphony to which the universe desires before humans.

Perhaps the new and renewed in the Alawani poem is its uniqueness and its rebellion against the fashionable style of the Sufi poem in general, both in terms of artistic construction or in terms of content and relations, and perhaps the best example of this is the great poetic balance allocated by Ibn Alwan to talk about Prophet Muhammad in a form that no one else has ever presented. <https://www.ye1.org/forum/threads/157222/>. He presented this fact according to three levels as can be seen in the following:

Supreme, prophetic, the everlasting \*\*\*\*\* Its lights  
reconnoiter the lights  
(Alwan,1990, p.343) (Self- trans.)

like other Sufi poets, Ibn Alwan uses symbols.

Looking at the lover is a greeting and silence between those who "Guards of reality" well know God's reality is a speech.  
The phrase with signals are gathered among them ... And of them coincided by understandings.  
They retreat in their signals, not their words. So, with the same inspiration

(Ibn Alwan, 1991, p.400). (Self- trans.)

Yet, the amorous symbol is not used to express the divine love or the true Muhammad-iyah. Ibn Alwan uses his own special symbol called “Howrah” (as mentioned already) that glorifies God. Also, he neither eliminates the role of reason nor looks down upon it as it is the case with many Sufis. To him, the mind is the soul of God and his light (IbnAlwan,1990, p.290).

امام لوسر لاد دصرق برل او ةلدا لوق عل او ملع رسلاف

The secret is knowledge, the mind is the evidence, and the Lord is intent and the messenger is a guide. (Ibn Alwan,1995, p.459) (Self- trans.)

His employment of the reason brings him close to the concerns and pains of people and plays a role in avoiding exaggeration. Here rejects separation from the reality of people while adhering to the essence of Sufism represented by asceticism. This means he was not only preoccupied with Sufism teaching and spirituality, but also with social and political issues of his time. His Sufism doesn't push him away from reality and isolates him from people. On the contrary, he was a defender of the downtrodden against the despotic rulers and tax collectors. He addresses bravely the ruler in a poem:

The days of your life (as a king) have a price; justice should prevail and deeds should be good...

They imposed a cash tax on the land due to their hatred of the adherents of the true shariah

(cited as in Aziz, 2004, pp.17-18)

He also exhorts the ruler in a poem to look after his subjects and to have pity on them.

This is Tihamah that has no money; neither has Lahj, Abyan, San'a nor Aden

what is the fault of the poor of the mountainous?

They are your neighbors, allies and those whom you can rely on

.....

Have pity on them; God's eye is watching. You are their guardians and the sultan is always trustworthy

(Aziz, 2004, p.18)

Ibn Alwan doesn't distract himself from praying to the people and asking God to fulfill their needs.

Oh! My Lord! I have tried my level best to find the right path and I have found your path is extremely worthy of following.

I pray to you to facilitate the way of people to get their needs fulfilled!

(Cited as Othman, 2002, p.80) (Self-Trans.)

## Preaching

Preaching is one feature of righteous scholars who have pity on people from the punishment of God and they are keen to guide people to the right path and Ibn Alwan is one of them. He spent his life preaching and defending people's rights. In his preaching, he warns people of the lowest world and its cunning; he Calls for the afterlife and for preparing ourselves for the Day of resurrection. He says:

Seize the opportunity of the remaining days of your life (by doing the good deeds) ... your age is gone and your sins are remaining.

You are advised to Repent to God before it is too late.

(Ibn Alwan, 1995, p.360) (Self-Trans.)

## Lamentation

The mystic looks at death differently than other people. Death is not something horrible as some people think. On the contrary, it is a transition from a world that is worthless towards the neighborhood of God; the neighborhood that the believers are keen on as It is their ultimate goal. Ibn Alwan is no exception. He condoles one of his friend as follows:

We cry over him and we have no doubt that ..... he looks Smiley in the presence of Radwan (Almighty God – The most gracious, the most merciful).

Definitely he will be rewarded for his good deeds more than he expects as God is the most generous... (Ibn Alwan, 1995, pp.538-539) (Self-Transl.)

The nostalgia has a place in Ibn Alwan's poetry. In the context of emotion raging in him-self, he depicts the impact left by the legendary love and love in his heart and how he becomes captive to this love and passion:

O h! my beloved whose heart is sound, my heart is wounded

And by the sword of love is slaughtered

As it saw your beauty, elegance and it becomes... As a rod of arak (a type of tree) bent by the wind

(Ibn- Alwan, 2010) (Self- trans.)

Ibn Alwan, the mystical Sheikh, draws the great impact that love lives in the heart of man, and that a person without love, affection and feelings loses the qualities of humanity. But it is not any love, it is the divine love that he believes it deserves to be given the widest and largest space in the depths.

It can be stated that perhaps what is new in Alwan's poetry is its uniqueness and rebellion in the fashionable style in the Sufi poem in general, whether in terms of technical construction or in terms of content and relations. Perhaps the best example of this is the large poetic balance allocated by Ibn Alwan to talk about the Muhammadiyah truth in a way that no one else has ever provided. Secondly, it is the lack of strict adherence to the meaning of lexicon vocabulary and Sufism terminology that prevails in his time. In effect, he has his own poetic diction in which he was able to add new vocabulary and terms to his mystical linguistic choices. The followings are examples: Milk: Faith. - Wine: Love. - Honey: Knowledge. - Branches: Hearts etc. (Bahout,2006). Abd al-'Aziz Al-Maqalih, the most outstanding contemporary Yemeni poet and philosopher who enjoys incomparable reputation for his blank verse in the Arab world adds that Ibn Alwan is the first Yemeni poet to introduce not only the form ruba'iyat (quatrain), but also al-Mubayyat (a poem written in the vernacular and characterized by melodious nature), and al-Mukhammasat ( stanza of five

lines). Al-Maqalih argues that Alwan is the first poet who introduces the vernacular Yemeni poetry and humayni (a famous genre of lyrical poetry) and the variety of rhyme schemes found in Ibn Alwan's poetry is unprecedented in Yemeni literature (Aziz, 2011, p.65).

Ibn Alwan's poetry is also characterized by technical unity. Though it is not rich in terms of artistic image; it tends to abstraction, deep symbolic intimation and employment of strange words. His poetry is dominated by the use of figure of speech such as Alliteration, Antithesis etc. (Othman, 2002, p.127). It can be said that "His contribution lies in his creative ability to produce rare and unusual forms and patterns that were unfamiliar to the ordinary reader or listener and that aroused his curiosity" (Aziz, 2004, p.31). This is what bestows Sufism in Yemen a unique privacy. In fact, what "gave Sufism in Yemen its specialty," is that "there was no scientific, philosophical or intellectual conflicts" during Ibn Alwan life in Yemen (Al-Hakeemi, 2000, p.1). Moreover, he doesn't encounter the same destiny imposed on other Sufi poets as he was very reasonable and moderate in his diction away from the spiritual transcendentalism. Many Sufi poets who went beyond the public understanding were beaten up or even killed in Yemen

## 5. THE SUPREME UNION (1990)

*At-Tawheed Al-A'zam* or *The Supreme Union* is regarded as Ahmad Ibn Alwan's greatest intellectual contribution to Sufi literature and to Sufism in general. It is a powerful and influential book that creates a legendary image of Ibn Alwan. This book is divided into three parts: the first part presents and interprets the ninety-nine names of God, the Great. It reflects the depth of mystical knowledge Ibn Alwan has had. He thoroughly describes the function of each divine name avoiding the complexities of the metaphysical meanings of Almighty God. Ibn Alwan has spiritually and practically treated the Names of God. The second section of the book, however, revolves around Alwan's philosophy in his Alwani spiritual litanies or speculations and Tawsheehs (invocation & supplications). Here, Ibn Alwan powerfully associates his name with the many religious stations like Hajj and Prayers. In Yemen and the Arabic Peninsula, Ibn Alwan's Tawsheeh's and litanies are strongly presented up to date. His azkar (remembrance of God) are repeated after the five prayers in most of the Yemeni masjids (mosques). His occasional tawsheeh about Hajj (pilgrimage) is learnt by heart by Hajjij (pilgrims) and their relatives.

The last part of the book deals with general topics about religion, Sufism and fortune teller. In his renowned book *al-Tawheed al-A'zam* (The Supreme Union), Alwan vividly presents the basic ground of his Sufi path "Tariqa". Unlike his book *Diwan Al-Futuh* 'Revelation' which is in two prose and verse sections, *The Supreme Union* includes Spiritual Litanies of Haj, Prayers, daily "wirds"

(litanies) and Tawsheehs. It enriches and glorifies the religious songs sung nowadays. It's still remembered due to the simplicity of its language, relevance of themes and spirituality of meaning.

Furthermore, Abdul-Aziz al-Maqalih and Abbas Ad-Dailami, the contemporary Yemeni critics, poets and writers have re-introduced the poems of Ibn Alwan and classified its poetic style. Both critics classified Alwan's poems as Humaini. Abdul-Aziz al-Maqalih, critically presents the Alwani poetry and describes it as the genuine treasure of the Yemeni literature. The following parts briefly discuss Ahmed Ibn Alwan's Philosophy in two of the major Sufi disciplines, i.e. the Master-Disciple relationship and the concept of Sam'a.

## 6. THE ALWANI CONCEPT OF THE SUFI CONCERT (SAM'A)

Sam'a or the Sufi concert is a traditional Sufi song. It is basically a spiritual musical performance accompanied with bodily movement. It is composed of poetic lyrics, sung by melodious voices and accompanied by musical tunes and produces pleasure in the heart.

Sam'a is not a Qur'anic term, but it is found in classical Arabic literature in the sense of song or musical performance. While it is often employed in Islamic disciplines such as grammar and theology, it has a special meaning in Sufism. Here, it generally denotes the act of listening to music, particularly a Sufi spiritual concert in a ritualized form. (Aziz, p.113)

Ibn Alwan treats Sam'a as a distinctive feature of the Sufi gatherings. These gatherings are organized under the sponsorship of a master. He strongly supports such practices and condemns its opponents. His belief is that sam'a is a spiritual food because it nourishes the soul. For him:

If Sam'a is accompanied by meaningful words, it surely leaves a strong and splendid impression on the heart."... Ibn Alwan elaborates on the concept of sam'a 'as if it were a heavenly wind, which carries with it the keys to divine secrets. He compares it to a magnet that attracts everything near it, in the same way that sensual bodies are drawn to each other. (Aziz, p.113)

Hence, in *The Supreme Union*, Ibn Alwan pays a special attention to the importance of Sam'a and its influence on the hearts of the listeners. It has its own effect. This influence brings the Shaikh and his disciples closer to God. His argument is based on evidence from the Holy Qur'an and Sunnah (Prophet Muhammad's sayings). He argues that our forefather, Adam (PBUH) was intoxicated under the influence of Satan's guileful trick when he was in heaven. Thus, he followed the Satan's advice and ate from the forbidden tree. The sin which led to his exile from heaven and his descend to the Earth. After that Adam realized his sin and regretted to it. He remembered God and asked his forgiveness. The same thing is with the Sufi groups. They feel intoxicated with the sam'a which, Ibn Alwan claims, reminds them

of their beloved God. For Ibn Alwan, sam'a is a kind of remembrance "dhikr" practiced by the pious people to purify their souls and be in close touch with God in a chanting way. Ibn Alwan considers sam'a as love and elaborates it in the way

Love as the proper vehicle leading to the states of longing for God. Ibn 'Alwān argues that love is like a tree that grows in the heart. Its land is anxiety (ashjān), its water is the tear dropping from the eyelids, and its fruit is longing for a meeting with the Merciful. This tree of love is in itself motionless and can only move by listening to the melodies (ānḥāl) of remembering God (dhikr, p.115). (Aziz, p.115).

However, Sufi critics assume that Sufi sam'a concerts have deviated from its purpose and turned to be mere body shakes without any spirituality; they are mere songs for whiling away the time and attracting new non-Sufi followers to the Sufi doctrine.

## 7. MASTER-DISCIPLE RELATIONSHIP IN THE ALWANI SUFI PHILOSOPHY

Master-Disciple 'Shiekh - Murid' relation is a dominant belief in the Sufi philosophy and one of its basic pillars. There is a strong link between the master's power and the disciple's obedience. Unless the disciple blindly believes and unquestionably follows the master's instructions, this relationship is groundless. In *The Supreme Union*, Ibn Alwan discussed many of the recurrent controversial matters about Sufism among which the relationship between master and disciple is just one. In this regard, he argues that disciple must and must not have a master. In case the disciple "Murid" is aware of the Noble Quran and Sunnah speech and has the capacity.

In *The Supreme Union*, Ibn Alwan raises questions related to the relationship between the master and his disciple and whether the disciple needs a master or the disciple is capable to manage without master. He further argued on the importance of the master to the disciple. In his argument, Ibn Alwan likens the relationship between the master and disciple to the relationship between our forefather Adam to the angels. Angels came to know about the Ninety-nine names of God through Adam, and thus like disciples to masters, angels were to Adam. Mohammed Ali Aziz, in his *Religion and Mysticism in Early Islam: Theology and Sufism in Yemen* further elaborates Ibn Alwan's philosophy in the way that

Adam was the master of the angels because they lacked his knowledge, and it was incumbent upon them to glorify him immediately. When the angels were not able to understand, God commanded them to prostrate themselves before Adam, thereby teaching them that their rank was lower than his. Thus, according to Ibn 'Alwān, the authority of shaykhs in relation to divine knowledge has been asserted. Not only were shaykhs glorified and respected but also people humbled themselves before them, kissing their feet, and kissing the ground in front of them. Ibn 'Alwān compares the master/disciple relationship to that of an infant who needs nutrition from his mother. (p.116)

Furthermore, Ibn Alwan stresses on the five principles that govern the master-disciple relationship. For him, the priority of the master for the disciple is to nourish him with what is called 'the spiritual milk', the way the mother feeds her baby in a balanced and tenderly way. This relation is to be progressed and the disciple's obedience and continuity is ensured. The second step the master is expected to follow in the pathway of Sufism is to make sure whether the disciple has adapted with the basic principles of Sufism. If so, the master "uses psychological knowledge to put his disciple in a state of neither feeling nor sensing. At this point, the master should clarify the subtle difference between the soul at peace (an-nafs al-mutma'inna) and an-nafs ash-shaytāniyya (the evil soul). He must explain the latter's shortcomings and its evil nature so that the disciple may reject it along with hatred." (p.116) This step is known as youthfulness where change takes place willingly by the disciple under the influence of the master's persuasive lectures and emotional chants.

The third phase in the pathway to Sufism in the Alwani philosophy is that the master has to exercise the disciple to initiate and gradually self-give up sins and egoism. In this stage, evil deeds are to be controlled and good deeds and habits are to be enhanced by the disciple's full will and master's guidance and supervision. Once the good habits of the disciple dominate and sins decrease, the fourth phase which makes the disciple closer to self-purification and perfection emerges. The fourth step, the step of maturity and wisdom, however, lies basically on the disciple's efforts whereas the master's role is but to encourage the disciple to enhance the spiritual unity and Godly secrets, blessings and graces. This stage is known as the core of Sufism as it calls for absolute trust in God (takhallie) which leads to the fifth and last approach of Sufism, the mastery and complete self-reliance. Others call it "a-ttahalee" where Sufi followers find the sweetness of their spiritualism in their hearts and reach the state of perfection. "In this final stage the master deems his disciple qualified to give fatwās (legal or mystical opinions) and to answer all questions raised by his fellows." (Aziz, p.117). These five stages are central to the evolution of any Sufi order.

By the end, it is worth noting that Ibn Alwan is known for his thorough knowledge of the Noble Quran and Prophet's discourse "Hadith". He uses quotations from Quran and Sunnah speeches in almost all of his works. His quotations reflect his absolute belief of Quran as the source of illumination and self-purification.

It is almost impossible to think about Ibn 'Alwān's writing without references to either the Qur'ān or the Sunna. They form an integral part of his discussion and are the means by which he constructs his mystical theory. The use of the Qur'ān and Sunna is a recurrent theme, which overwhelmingly colours his literary style. (Aziz, p.113).

Hence, it is safe to claim that the Alwani philosophy of Sufism is a direct reflection of his profound understanding on the thorough meaning of the Holy Qur'an and the Noble Sunnah speeches. "His Sufi thought is grounded in Islamic scripture on every point. His exegesis moves fluidly between literal meanings of God's word and Sufi interpretation." (Aziz, p.109)

Another very important point to be mentioned in this regard is that Ahmed ibn Alwan has not been influenced by any school of Sufism or particular Sufi master. He is known for his own way of Sufism. He enjoyed a very distinctive and original path that distinguished him from other Sufi figures. Therefore, Ibn Alwan majorly contributes in the establishment and development of Sufism and Sufi Literature in Yemen and the Arabic peninsula. His presence in the Sufis' belief nowadays is noticeable via the number of his followers who visit his tomb in Taiz city in the middle of Yemen. His Tomb lied in a mosque named after him in Yafrus village, Jabal Habashi district in Taiz and is being visited up till day. His thoughts and contributions have been orally kept and transmitted from one generation to another till our present time. His role is undeniably so pivotal and the contribution he made to both Sufi literature and culture is a vivid evidence of his greatness and excellence. All in all, it can be safely concluded that there is a popular belief, which has been passed on from one generation to another since the time of Ibn 'Alwān's death, that:

No one has ever won the hearts and minds of more followers than Ibn 'Alwān. His charismatic character as a social reformer and spiritual leader has led numerous admirers to observe an annual gathering around his tomb. This fact can be seen nowadays as the best evidence of his relevance to Yemen's popular as well as intellectual traditions (Aziz, pp.65-66).

## CONCLUSION

Sufism is a spiritual exercise to transform one's negativities and reach a state of harmony with God. It is a selfless experience and actualization of truth by means of love, devotion and dedication. Reputed Sufi scholars believe that the Sufi traditions begin with the emergence of Islam. Since then, Sufism as a philosophy, ideology and doctrine has elevated to include all scopes of human life. Sufi Arab Figures have a role in spreading Sufism around the globe. They contribute in developing Sufism in the form of literary productions. Many schools in Iraq, Persia, Yemen, Turkey, India, Indonesia and other parts of the Islamic world consider Sufism as one of the considered Islamic doctrines.

The second part of this research discussed the emergence of Sufism in Yemen. There is no doubt that the Ayyubids importantly contributed in the establishment of Sufism in Yemen. They adopt Sufi thoughts and encourage establishing schools and institutions at the twelfth century.

Historians and researchers confirm that Ali bin Umar bin Mohammed al-Ahdal (602-1205) and Isa bin Iqbal al-Hattar (606-1209) are the founding mystics of Sufism as a sect in Yemen.

The third part, however, tackles the life of the Great Sufi scholar, Ahmad ibn Alwan and explores his role in shaking out the Sufi sect in Yemen. It also describes the rise and development of Sufi institutions with special reference to the theology, Sufism established by him. Ibn Alwan's is perhaps the greatest religious and mystical thinker of pre-modern Yemen. His literary as well as religious contribution to the Sufism in Yemen and Arab Peninsula is of great importance. It is found that Quran and Sunnah are the main sources of his intellectual and literary component. He has some outstanding views on some issues related to mysticism such as using the reason. Unlike other Sufis, his asceticism doesn't isolate him from his people's concern. On the contrary, he was close to his people, sharing them their concerns and ambitions as has been reflected in his poetry.

It has been concluded that his intellectual and literary contribution are unique and not influenced by any Sufi. He also introduces his own special symbol "Al -howra" which is taken from the holy Quran. He uses the wine symbol in the divine love poetry. His Sufi philosophy in his book "The Supreme Union" is deeply investigated. The five pillars of Sufi doctrine that govern the master-disciple relationship is thoroughly investigated. In a nutshell, the importance of the Alwani philosophy lies in the new atmosphere created by him which continue to affect the religious, social and political life of Yemen and Arab Peninsula even today. It has to be stated that Ahmad ibn Alwan has not been influenced by any school of Sufism or particular Sufi master. He is known for his own way of Sufism. He enjoys a very distinctive and original path that distinguishes him from other Sufi figures. Therefore, Ibn Alwan majorly contributes in the establishment and development of Sufism and Sufi literature in Yemen and the Arabic peninsula.

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