
In an article published in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* six decades ago, Francesco Gabrieli argued that *adab*, more than any other concept, stood at the heart of Islamic civilisation. A polysemic term, translated variously as “courtesy,” “propriety,” “etiquette,” “manners” and “proper comportment,” its importance within Muslim culture—and Sufism in particular—cannot be overstated. When the Prophet said, “Verily God taught me *adab*, and he perfected my *adab*,” what precisely did he mean? For well over a millennium, Muslim scholars and saints have meditated on the significance of the report, and the role of *adab* (a term otherwise absent in the Qurʾān) in Islamic spirituality.

In the present volume, almost seven hundred pages long and divided into four sections, the editors present us with the single most comprehensive overview of *adab* in Sufism to date, spanning virtually the entire history of the tradition. Comprising more than two dozen essays by specialists from Europe, North America and the Middle-East, and growing out of a conference held in Paris in 2012, it builds on the pioneering contributions of Meir Jacob Kister, Fritz Meier, Barbara Metclaf, and others. Without question, it will pave the way to both expanding and refining our understanding of a concept so pivotal to Sufism, that the early authority Abū Ḥafṣ al-Ḥaddād (d. c. 265/878–879) could declare, “All of Sufism resides in *adab*” (al-taṣawwuf kulluhu *adab*). The words are ornately inscribed on the cover in Arabic calligraphy.

The study opens with a short essay by Denis Gril (author of a 1972 dissertation on *adab*), on ethics and *adab* in Sufism, setting the stage for the remainder of the volume. He explores *adab* in the Sunna, its relation to the Qurʾān and to the idea of *akhlāq* (“character traits” or “virtues”). This is followed by a treatment by Annabel Keeler on the development of the idea in the formative period of Sufism. From her we learn that among the earliest works on the subject were the *Ādāb al-nufūs* by al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) and the *Kitāb adab al-nafs* by al-Tirmidhī (d. 295–300/905–910), both of which envision *adab* as a method to tame and control the passions. To this end, they outline the regimen of hunger, solitary retreat, and self-discipline required to bring the soul into conformity to the dictates of God. In the case of al-Muḥāsibī, educating (*taʾdīb*) the soul demands knowledge (*maʿrifa*), vigilant observation (*murāqaba*) and self-evaluation (*muḥāsaba*). And in al-Tirmidhī’s work, there is a particular accent placed on *taʾdīb* as *riyāḍa* or spiritual *ascesis*, a process also described as *faṭma*, namely “weaning the *nafs* of its habitual lusts and...
passions (shahawāt)" (much as one might wean a child of his mother's milk). Curiously, neither of these works emphasise adab as a principle to regulate interactions with others, the concentration being on cultivating one's relation with God. Keeler also draws attention to another early treatise, the Adab al-muftaqir ilā Llāh by al-Junayd (d. 298/910). Devoted primarily to elucidating the nature of khawāṭir or “incoming thoughts,” it was intended to help the aspirant recognise their points of origin, that is to say, whether they emerge from the soul, Satan or God. In many ways, the goal of the work was to help the seeker cultivate adab with God inwardly through an attention to the heart. On the other hand, the Adab al-faqīr by Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Rūdhabārī (d. 369/979) dealt perhaps more extensively than other early text on interpersonal relations, particularly with fellow travelers or fuqarā’.

On the whole, Keeler’s textual analysis, most of which is devoted to the views of Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), is meticulous and impressive. While it does not offer much by way of conceptual depth, the fault is not that of Keeler. The earliest Sufi (or “proto-Sufi”) works were quite terse, and often read (we can safely presume) alongside oral instruction by a teacher, who might use them as springboards for personal commentary. We cannot also ignore that the seeds of “meaning” planted in the formative years of Sufism would only sprout in their fullness in later history, as masters would employ the aphorisms and pithy sayings of the tradition’s founders as pegs upon which to develop their own insights, building on the wisdom of their predecessors through formal and informal super-commentaries.

In “Reading Medieval Persian Hagiography through the Prism of Adab,” Ahmet Karamustafa turns to adab in the teachings of Abū Saʿīd b. Abī al-Khayr (d. 440/1049) as found in the Asrār al-tawḥīd by Ibn al-Munawwar, a hagiographical work compiled about a century and a half after the saint's death. While Abū Saʿīd enforced rules of adab on his disciples, he would frequently relax them in the interests of the higher aims of the mystical quest. While adab, for him, formed an essential ingredient to spiritual wayfaring, its rules were not set in stone (unless aligned with the sharīʿa), and could be overturned when the shaykh felt necessary. One disciple might, for example, be upbraided for apparent discourtesy towards peers, while another could be lauded for a similar affront. And this was because the spiritual insight or fīrāsa of Abū Saʿīd allowed him to see what the disciple needed. In short, adab for the saint was, in the words of Karamustafa, “dynamic and adaptable,” and he never allowed its rules of conduct to become reified. The essay is an enjoyable and entertaining read.

Florian Sobieroj’s contribution examines a little-known work by al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), the ‘Uyūn al-ajwiba fī funūn al-asʿila (“Sources of Responses to a Variety of Questions”), structured around a series of questions about
wayfaring. Sobieroj provides both a synoptic overview of the tract, authored in the format of Arab adab literature, while concentrating on those motifs most directly related to ethics: futuwwa (“chivalry”), muruwwa (“manliness”) and akhlāq (“character traits”). The first of the triad involves, for al-Qushayrī, chivalry with respect to the rights of God and His creatures. Of these two, the former entails fulfilling obligations to God ungrudgingly, with consent of the heart. The latter involves being just towards others without demanding justice for oneself, ensuring that others are never shamed, and gift-giving without a desire for return. The qualities most closely related to futuwwa with God’s creatures demand altruism and selflessness. As for muruwwa, the focus in al-Qushayrī’s treatise is on how to interact with the rich. Finally, in his treatment of akhlāq, al-Qushayrī identifies its transformation and refinement with Sufism itself within the context of a commentary on the early saying, “Sufism is character.” Moreover, all three of these qualities (futuwwa, muruwwa, and the beautification of akhlāq) involve, in some capacity, divesting the self of baser, purely human qualities. One of the most interesting features of the ‘Uyūn is how al-Qushayrī distinguishes self-centered, egotistical inspirations from diabolical ones, arguing that while the nafs desires recognition, the devil desires sin. And while the devil disappears with the remembrance of God, the nafs lingers, only losing stability with the advent of “unveilings” and “witnessing.” The nafs also cannot be slain. Its power, however, can be considerably weakened when cut by the sword of spiritual striving. For some reason, perhaps a simple oversight, Sobieroj translates muḥaqqiqūn—a standard term from the nomenclature of Sufism—as “researchers” instead of “realizers” (152) in an otherwise erudite essay.

In “Training the Prophetic Self,” Nathan Hofer explores the role of adab and riyāda in the Jewish pietism of Abraham Maimonides (d. 635/1237), son of the illustrious philosopher. The focal point of Hofer’s treatment is the Kifāyat al-ʿābidīn (“That which Suffices for the Devotees of God”), a work illustrative of the Judeo-Islamic symbiosis that was born out of medieval Islamicate culture. Through a survey of some of the most important works of Jewish spirituality authored in Islamicate lands that preceded the Kifāyat, Hofer highlights those particular themes that were not emphasised as much by Abraham’s predecessors, among them adab. In so doing, Hoffer notes how he distinguished riyāda sharʿiyā from riyāda adabiyya. The former was equivalent within an Islamic context to observing the outwards forms of religion, outlined by Law, while the latter corresponded to supererogatory performances with particular attention to the inward states that accompanied them, and through which the performance of the laws was perfected. In a very loose sense, the distinction centered around what al-Muḥāsibī identified as the “actions of
the limbs” as opposed to “actions of the heart.” This was a distinction that, in Jewish tradition in Muslim lands, would come to prominence in the *Farāʾid al-qulūb* (“Duties of the Heart”) of Bahya b. Paqūda (d. circa 1065), a Jewish text whose influence is discernable in the *Kifāyat*. Moreover—and this is critical to Hofer’s treatment—through the perfection of the two forms of *riyāda*, the aspirant could attain, as far as Abraham was concerned, the stage of “prophecy.” While Hofer draws attention to the roots of this idea in earlier thinkers, such as Maimonides, his otherwise comprehensive treatment may have been enriched through a brief engagement with those Sufis (like al-Ghazālī) who also likened the penultimate stages of the mystic quest to the experience of *nubuwā* (with the critical difference being that the “legislative prophecy” of prophets was, in the final order, superior to the “non-legislative prophecy” of saints). The addition would have completed an otherwise comprehensive and methodologically nuanced treatment of a fascinating period of Judeo-Islamic history.

Lloyd Ridgeon’s somewhat speculative essay rests on a hypothesis that attempts to situate competing conceptions of *adab* through a diachronic analysis of the history of Sufism. His argument is that the “apologetic” literature of the early period contributed to creating formal structures of propriety to be observed by all aspirants. This was followed by the emergence of more antinomian expressions (embodied, for example, in the figure of the *qalandar*, such as Shams-i Tabrīzī (d. 645/1247)) characterised by the overturning of rigid formalities and orthopraxy. The stage of “alternatives and alterity” was then succeed by one of “accommodation.” While this somewhat Hegelian view of the historical unfolding of Sufism, where dialectical forces are stabilised in a final, third period of neutralisation remains, by Ridgeon’s own confession, a hypothesis in need of further scrutiny, it provides a creative way of looking at the evolution and transformation of competing attitudes towards *adab* within the complex history of an internally diverse tradition.

In Erik Ohlander’s “Situating Group, Self, and Act in the Medieval Sufi *ribāṭ*,” he examines a short treatise on *adab* by ‘Imād al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Suhrawardī (d. 655/1257), the son of the more famous Abū Ḥafs ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234), founder of the Suhrawardiyya, and nephew of Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī (d. 563/1168), author of the *Kitāb ʿādāb al-mūridin*. While ‘Imād al-Dīn was a public figure in his own life, hailing from a family of prominent Shāfiʿī-Sufi scholars, his memory was largely forgotten after his death. By unearthing his only extant work for critical analysis, the *Kitāb zād al-musāfir wa-adab al-ḥāḍir* (“Book of the Guest’s Provisions and the Resident’s Comportment”), Ohlander intends at least partially to balance a tendency within the historiography of Sufism to give undue attention to, in his own
words, “larger than life actors to whom posterity often assigns hyperbolic significance,” all the while relegating “minor” figures such as ‘Imād al-Dīn “to the proverbial footnote.” The danger in such a tendency, for Ohlander, lies in that in the best case scenario it thins out what might otherwise be a much more robust tradition, and in the worst case scenario, distorts the tradition through critical elisions. Ohlander’s analytic survey of the text brings to light a Sufi master who was concerned both with the dangerous proclivities of certain “trouble makers” infesting the ribāṭs of Baghdad, and also with laying out the rules of observance for those who wished to move from the rank of mere aspirants (mutaṣawwifs) to arrivers (muntahīs) within the mystico-ascetic sodalities of his day. In the well-written essay, Ohlander builds on his previous research on ‘Imād al-Dīn’s father (see Sufism in an Age of Transition: ‘Umar al-Suhrawardi and the Rise of the Islamic Mystical Brotherhoods. Leiden: Brill, 2008).

In “Ādāb with an Absent Master,” Michele Petrone examines the Tijānī ideal of how to comport oneself in the presence of the shaykh. The rules of etiquette are themselves premised on the belief that behind him stands the presence or ḥadra of the founder of the ṭarīqa, Ahmad al-Tijānī (d. 1230/1814), behind whom towers the Prophet. And if we are to move further, the receding presences end in God Himself (al-ḥaḍra al-ilāhiyya) of whom the Prophet and the shaykhs are no more than tajllīs or self-disclosures. While Aḥmad al-Tijānī did not speak extensively of adab, he did express the idea through the language of makārim al-akhlāq or “noble character traits.” And in his own life, he taught as much by words as by example. From Petrone’s essay we learn that he never, for example, stretched out his legs in the direction of the qibla, nor raised his voice in the mosque. Inwardly, his propriety comprised abandoning self-will or self-determination (tadbīr), leaving matters to God, even in his supplicatory prayers. As for the rules of adab within the formal practices of the ṭarīqa, Petrone draws attention to the custom of spreading out a white sheet on the floor during the waẓīfa or communal recitation of the Order’s litany, particularly for the Jawhara al-kamāl that closes the ritual. This cloth is spread out to reverentially receive the six presences of the Prophet, the four righteous caliphs, and Aḥmad al-Tijānī, the arrival of whom some members of the ṭarīqa claim to witness through an ocular mystical vision. The rules of etiquette require all initiates to respectfully sit around the sheet with knees bent for the duration of the litany, which may run up to an hour, depending on the tempo of recitation. The emphasis on recognising Aḥmad al-Tijānī as the shaykh behind the living shaykh of the branch of the ṭarīqa one is affiliated with cannot be overstated, so much so that even if one finds a murabbī or spiritual guide who is deficient in both knowledge and insight, the rules of etiquette still fall into place, since the “guide behind the guide” is the founder of the Order, the
Prophet, and finally God as al-Hādī (The Guide). Petrone might have considered bringing into his discussion certain metaphysical themes of Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) whose resonances permeate Tijānī attitudes towards adab (such as recognising God as the ultimate object of adab through the intermediaries of the shaykhs and the Prophet). At the same time, the parameters he set out around his analysis—centered almost entirely on Tijānī doctrines and practices alone—would have excluded such a possibility.

Constraints of space prevent this reviewer from covering the many other contributions to this volume. The few that have been touched on serve to present a cross-sectional overview of its contents. Aside from a few mistakes in transliteration, inconsistencies in death dates, and simple typos—inevitable perhaps for a study of this length and nature—the work has, generally speaking, been well-edited. The introductory essay, which charts the history of Western scholarship of adab, is remarkably comprehensive in its scope (although the English could have been improved). All things considered, Ethics and Spirituality in Islam will be an invaluable resource for students and scholars of Islam, and should find its place in every major research library. The prohibitive cost of the work, however, will likely prevent it from making its way into personal libraries.

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Bibliography
