In al-Suyūṭī’s times, in the 9th/15th century, the Muslim scholar steeped in Sufism had become a somewhat familiar figure. Drawing from the great tradition of al-Junayd and al-Ghazālī, he merged within himself exoteric and esoteric sciences, argumentative approach (al-istidlāl wa-l-burhān), and intuitive discipline (al-kashf wa-l-ʿiyān). The path had already been prepared by a large number of ‘ulamāʾ mostly following the Ashʿarī creed and belonging to the Shāfīʿī school of law. They constantly used the scholarly status they earned in various Islamic sciences in order to stress the superiority of spiritual knowledge and Sufism.¹

Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī² was undoubtedly the most prominent scholar involved in ṭaṣawwuf of the Mamlūk era, and he acted as a pioneer in this field. Suyūṭī was so in the sense that he was famous as a ʿālim and a muftī in his lifetime, from India to Takrūr (West Africa), which was not the case of Ibn Ḥajar or Ibn Taymiyya for instance, and he was the first scholar to assume so clearly the defense of Sufism. However, inasmuch as is possible, we need to consider whether al-Suyūṭī did in fact taste mystical experiences or whether he merely claimed to have done so, for we know that he claimed his superiority in many disciplines.

¹ The Nature of the Commitment of al-Suyūṭī to Sufism

To al-Suyūṭī, the discipline of ḥadīth represents “the noblest of sciences,”³ because it is related to the prophetic model, which for him is the only way to reach God. Although he worked and wrote extensively in the formal field of ʿībna al-ḥadīth, he stressed the fact that this knowledge should not be confined to books but rather that it should be experienced with presence of heart and brought to life from the inside. Little wonder, then, that he should have claimed to have seen the Prophet more than seventy times whilst in a waking state.

¹ See Geoffroy, Soufisme 89–98.
² On him, see Geoffroy, al-Suyūṭī and Spevack, al-Suyūṭī.
³ Al-Suyūṭī, Ḥusn i, 155.
Al-Suyūṭī as a Sufi

Such visions (ru’yā) of the Prophet lend great charisma in Sufism. In one of those visions the Prophet came to visit him in his house and called him “shaykh al-sunna.” Subsequently al-Suyūṭī explained that, during a vision, one may be directly informed by the Prophet about the validity of a ḥadīth. Thus al-Suyūṭī succeeded in gaining a personal and mystical relation with the spiritual entity of the Prophet. It is not surprising, then, that he should have attached importance to the complementarity between the esoteric and exoteric aspects of the Prophet, as he did in a work with an explicit title: al-Bāhir fī hukm al-nabī bi-l-bāṭin wa-l-ẓāhir (The Brilliance of the Prophet’s Judgment on Exoteric and Esoteric Matters). So, as in other fields of his scientific involvement, al-Suyūṭī was a profoundly traditionalist Sunni scholar: he was following the prophetic model not only outwardly, but also at a deep inward level.

2 His Initiatory Affiliations

At the time of al-Suyūṭī several modalities of initiatory affiliation were accepted in the Sufi path. The most common and less demanding was that of tabarruk, in which the seeker was given the Sufi “mantle” (khirqa) through which he received a spiritual impulse (baraka) from a shaykh. This impulse was transmitted through a chain of shaykhs (the sīsilā) leading back to the Prophet, who is held to be the originator of all mystic teaching. Al-Suyūṭī informs us that he was clothed in the khirqa by Ibn Imām al-Kāmiliyya in 869/1465 who gave him a licence (ijāza) to bestow the khirqa on whomever he wished. The chains of authority (isnād) of this investiture come mainly from the Aḥmadiyya, Qādiriyya, and Suhrawardiyya branches.

These multiple affiliations, as common as they were, could have variable impact from an initiatory perspective, and as such never replaced the personal relationship between a Sufi master and his disciple. So one might have received a number of khirqa (sometimes over thirty) but could only have a shaykh of tarbiya at a single time. This was the case for al-Suyūṭī: his shaykh was Muḥammad al-Maghribī (d. 910/1504), a prominent Shādhilī master in

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4 Al-Shaʿrānī, Ṭabaqāt 29.
5 Ibid. 28–29.
6 Al-Suyūṭī, Ṭaḥdhir 50.
7 Al-Suyūṭī, Khiraq.
8 Sartain, Biography 34; Geoffroy, Soufisme 516.
9 For the case of al-Suyūṭī see Geoffroy, Soufisme 202.