Training the Prophetic Self: Adab and riyāḍa in Jewish Sufism

Nathan Hofer

Introduction

There are two intersecting discourses related to Sufi adab that I would like to explore in this paper. First, I am interested in the protean nature of Sufi conceptions of adab in general. The notion of adab has a complicated etymology and an even more complicated semantic development, which Luca Patrizi has demonstrated in some detail. From table manners, to literature, to rules, to ethics and disciplining the self, the term covers a wide variety of meaning and usage. Even within the more limited discursive framework of Sufi textual traditions there exists a broad range of the meaning of adab for any particular Sufi author. Thus, for example, in many of the sayings recorded by Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1074), adab connotes a kind of ideal behavior or comportment, particularly as this relates to the prophetic Sunna. For some later writers like Abū l-Najīb al-Suhrawardi (d. 563/1168), the term means more narrowly the “rules of conduct.” Of course, many authors evince a range of meaning for the term within a single work, to the point that it becomes difficult to translate it consistently (at least in English). Untangling the semantic range of Sufi notions of adab can thus become quite difficult.

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1 I would like to thank the conference organizers and all the participants for their invaluable feedback and comments on an earlier version of this essay. Much of my thinking on this topic has developed significantly since the conference; I have chosen to leave this essay as I originally wrote it, as a product of its time and place.

2 In addition to his doctoral thesis, see Patrizi, “The Allegory of the Divine Banquet and the Origins of the Notion of Adab.” See also the discussion in Gabrieli, “Adab,” and Ohlander, “Adab, in Ṣūfism.”

3 Qushayrī, Risāla, 432–7.

4 Suhrawardi, Ādāb al-murīdīn. It is Milson, A Sufi Rule, 27, who translates adab here as “rules of conduct.”

5 I have in mind here Suhrawardī’s ‘Awārif, in which he uses the term adab/ādāb sometimes to mean specific rules and sometimes to describe ideal comportment rooted in the Sunna of Muḥammad. Gramlich captures this semantic range in his translation of the ‘Awārif, Die Gaben der Erkenntnisse, in which he consistently translates adab/ādāb with “gute Sitte/guten Sitten.”
The second idea that interests me about *adab* is the way Sufis have theorized the relationship between notions of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* (outer/inner or exoteric/esoteric) and the ways these are reciprocally linked to the body by the concept of *adab* in many Sufi treatises. I mean by this that exterior bodily comportment is coupled in some fundamental way to the interior states of the self and mediated through the embodied performance of *adab*. For example, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234) writes that “*adab* is the rectification of the exterior and the interior,” or when Abū Ḥafs al-Ḥaddād (d. ca. 260/873) says, “good exterior *adab* is the sign of good interior *adab*.6

Here I would like to focus my discussion on the point where these two theoretical discourses about *adab*—which I will call the semantic and the somatic—intersect. That is to say, I will examine how one particular author weaves the semantic and somatic discourses about *adab* into a coherent theory of the embodied self. I have chosen as my point of entry into this double issue the well known text of Abraham Maimonides (d. 1237), the *Kifāyat al-ʿābidīn* (“That which Suffices for the Devotees of God”), a work in Judeo-Arabic that scholars typically categorize as a work of “Jewish Sufism” because of Abraham’s explicit acknowledgement of Sufi ideas and practices in the text.7 While Abraham did not call himself a Sufi—the members of the movement of which he was a leader called themselves Pietists (*ḥasidim*)—his treatise is nevertheless replete with Sufi ideas and terminology. Indeed, he argued that the Sufis had actually preserved (perhaps even appropriated) the original praxis of the Jewish prophets.

The theory behind my choice of the *Kifāya* as a way of exploring *adab* is two-fold. First, Abraham was, like other educated Jews living in the medieval Middle East, embedded within the larger Islamicate intellectual culture of his day, which included the traditions of Sufism. The *Kifāya* clearly exhibits the marks of its time, late Ayyubid Egypt, in which Sufism was exploding in popularity all over Egypt.8 Given this context, I read the *Kifāya* not as a Jewish work with some “Sufi stuff” added in, but as a coherent and holistic product of what S.D. Goitein called the “Jewish Arab symbiosis.”9 Abraham’s treatment of *adab*