

THE SPIRITUAL CULTURE OF FOOD: EATING CUSTOMS IN EARLY SUFISM

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Studying food culture in early Sufism has been paid little scholarly attention, though it is able to afford us a way of reconstructing one of the pillars of early Sufi practice. This paper examines two aspects of Sufi food culture—individual and communal ‘food fashions’ with a special focus on 4th/10th-century Sufism. The exploration of early Sufi social relations is closely bound up with the food culture and eating manners of early Sufis. This profoundly social activity played a large role in forming and transforming collective Sufi identity. Al-Makkī’s *Qūt al-qulūb* gains a special reference being the most important textbook on eating customs in the period under investigation.

Key words: early Sufis, Sufi literature, anthropology of food, Sufi manners, hagiographies, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī’s *Qūt al-qulūb*, Sufi banquets.

1. Background

Given that specific eating customs and food cultures exist in every society across the globe from time immemorial, it is no surprise that they have become the object of modern anthropological research. The commonly heard assertion that ‘Food is almost always shared’ highlights the social aspect of food (Fox 2003). Table manners, eating settings, ceremonies marking social status, the meanings associated with food, and food fashions have all been extensively studied by anthropologists of food. As Corrie Norman (2012: 409) notes, however, scholars of religion have rarely exhibited any interest in the dynamic relationship between food and religion. The field is thus populated largely by anthropologists and sociologists.

In a recent article analysing ‘Imād al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī’s (d. 655/1257) *Zād al-musāfir*, Erik Ohlander (2017) cites numerous Sufi works composed during the late 6th/12th century that discuss proper eating manners and etiquette. Their authors

include 'Imād al-Dīn's father—Abū Ḥafṣ 'Umar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234), his father's paternal uncle and master—Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī (d. 563/1168), and Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. 617/1220), the influential master of Khawārazm (Ohlander 2017: 434, Note 38). Both 'Imād al-Dīn and his father refer directly to Sufi customs relating to the drinking and serving of water (Ohlander 2017: 434, Note 40; al-Suhrawardī 1967: 201). These writings address eating manners as an integral part of their treatment of the communal aspects of Sufi food culture in the framework of *ribāṭ*-based Sufism.

In religious terms, food is frequently regarded in 'low' terms—an earthly pursuit closely linked to the world of flesh and sin. In general cultural terms, it is often associated with sex, the two activities being closely associated with intense pleasure. This kinship underlies the negative attitude early medieval Muslim renunciants (*zuhhād*) exhibited towards the two lustful desires (*al-shahwatān*) they believe reduce men to the level of animals.¹ In early medieval works that focus on Muslim ethics according to *sharī'a* law, improper sexual behaviour is frequently attributed to overeating. Muslim moralists thus often treat the two desires together. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), for example, outlines a detailed system for subjugating the lusts of the abdomen (*shahwat al-baṭn*) and the sexual organ (*shahwat al-farj*) alike. Al-Ghazālī discusses in much detail ten advantages of hunger (*faḍīlat al-jū'*) based on a large number of *ḥadīth* traditions and sayings attributed to pious figures and renunciants (*zuhhād*) of the first centuries of Islam. Furthermore, al-Ghazālī goes to provide practical instructions to control one's appetite. These instructions are classified under four categories: the first relates to the elementary need to consume lawful food (*ḥalāl*); the second relates to the quantity of food and the methods of minimising it; the third to the appointed times for eating; and the fourth category relates to the quality of food. Under this category, al-Ghazālī surveys different methods that are supposed to help the Sufi² control his appetite such as avoiding meat and all luxury

¹ See Richard Gramlich's (1997: 222–249) detailed discussion of hunger among the early renunciants of Islam.

² It should be noted here that the use of the term 'Sufi' to either cover the entire range of spirituality during early medieval Islam or to indicate Muslim male or female mystics is problematic. Referring to all representatives of Muslim spirituality as 'Sufis' is absolutely misleading. The existence of figures like al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (see hereinafter) and al-Niffarī (mid-4th/10th century), who were both not known as Sufis during their lifetimes, demonstrates how problematic this term can be. The last decade has witnessed attempts to challenge the conventional definition of Sufism as 'Islamic mysticism' by scholars with 'post-colonial' and 'anti-orientalist' approaches. Nathan Hofer is one of these scholars who has argued that 'Sufism' cannot be a synonym for 'mysticism' (see Hofer 2015: 3–7). Sara Sviri and Abū al-Wafā al-Taftāzānī are among the scholars who argue in favour of the conventional definition of Sufism as mysticism (see Sviri 2012: 18–19; al-Taftāzānī 1991: 15–19; al-Taftāzānī n.d.: 4/1, 47). For a brief discussion of this debate, see Cecere 2018: 35, Note 1. Throughout this paper, I have generally used the term 'Sufi' to indicate those pious whose form of spirituality was laid down by the group of *ṣūfiyya*. Ahmet Karamustafa has shown that the term *ṣūfiyya* as it was used during the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries refers to Baghdadi pietists who developed a special mode of Iraqi piety with distinguishing characteristics. Karamustafa's work is centred around the theme of how 3rd/9th to 6th/12th-century Sufism developed a self-conscious mode of piety with a distinctive system of doctrines and practices that came to be enhanced by an

foods. A full commitment to this renunciatory system might be motivated, as al-Ghazālī asserts, by the Sufi's aspiration for social fame, and that is why, in such cases, it would be better for him to return to his normal eating customs (al-Ghazālī n.d.: Vol. 3, 117–156). Al-Ghazālī's moral discussion demonstrates to what extent eating customs are essential in the process of establishing one's devotional life. Geert Jan van Gelder (2000: 3) demonstrated in his study of the representation of food in Classical Arabic works that food, good behaviour and literature are closely intertwined in Islamic culture. This fact is exemplified by the etymological link between the terms *adab* 'literature/good behaviour' and *ma'duba* 'banquet'.

In addressing the early history of Sufism, we must ask how and when food and eating were regarded as base activities and became central aspects of the discussion of Sufi morals and behaviour. The association between food and literature in Classical Arabic literature has very interesting implications when related to Sufism. The early Sufis believed that, food being an earthly entity, eating should be restricted to a minimum. The greater the Sufis' spirituality, the more they should be able to fast for longer periods. While we find extremes of minimal food consumption, a new trend emerged in the 4th/10th century as documented in various sources. Up until this point, the Sufi interest in food had centred around the individual and the ways in which he could minimise his intake and purify himself. Attention during the 4th/10th century began to focus upon Sufi banquets and communal invitations to meals.

This paper examines these two aspects of Sufi food culture—individual and communal 'food fashions'. The exploration of early Sufi social relations is closely bound up with the food culture and eating manners of the early Sufis of Islam. This profoundly social activity played a large role in forming and transforming collective Sufi identity in various historical periods. The renunciatory custom of self-starvation constituted one of the major theoretical avenues through which Sufi authors began discussing doctrinal issues and behavioural practices—the renunciation of suspect sources of sustenance (*tark al-shubuhāt*), spiritual purity, and rigorous self-observation (*murāqaba*). The issue of purifying what one ingests frequently arises in discussions of other topics in early Sufi writings. Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī's (d. 412/1021) *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī's (d. 465/1072) *al-Risāla fī 'ilm al-taṣawwuf*, and Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī's (d. ca. 470/1077) *Salwat al-'ārifīn wa-uns al-mushtāqīn* (*The Comfort of the Mystics*, to borrow Gerhard Böwering and Bilal Orfali's translation) are prominent examples. Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī, for instance, quotes the statement: 'Make your fame unknown and purify your food' (*akhmil dhikraka wa-ṭayyib ma' amaka*) (see al-Ṭabarī 2013: 32 [Arabic text]). Qushayrī and Ṭabarī similarly cite Sahl ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) as saying: 'The one whom devoutness (*wara'*) does not accompany can consume an elephant's head without satisfying his appetite' (al-Ṭabarī 2013: 33; al-Qushayrī 1940: 59).

Study of this issue has been paid little scholarly attention. References to the position that food plays in Islamic cultures are very few and they focus mostly on food

influential literary tradition, and which would eventually occupy the forefront of both early medieval Islamic intellectual life and actual social-religious life (see Karamustafa 2007: 1–37).

and eating customs in the Muslim law (*sharī'a*). Such is Michael Cook's 'Early Islamic Dietary Law' (1986), and M. Khālid Mas'ūd's 'Food and the Notion of Purity in the *Fatwā* Literature' (1994) (see Cook 1986: 217–277; Mas'ūd 1994: 89–110). Valerie Hoffman's fascinating paper on eating and fasting in Sufi tradition (1995) is the first, as far as I know, to put the focus on food in Sufism. It surveys the different attitudes toward food in Sufi tradition from the early phase till modern time with a special reference to Egypt. Hoffman argues that rather than embracing hunger among their early ancestors, modern Egyptian Sufis turn serving food into a central constituent of their devotional life (Hoffman 1995: 465–484). Gabriel Said Reynolds in his article on the Sufi approach to food (2000) makes a case study of Sufi *ādāb*, i.e. the rules of conduct for Sufis, to show that in the transformation from renunciation (*zuhd*) to Sufism, food ceased to be an item simply to be disdained out of rigoristic fervour, and, instead, it became fully integrated into the developing order of the Sufi life (Reynolds 2000: 198–217).

Studying food culture affords us a way of reconstructing one of the pillars of early Sufi practice. Can we identify a set of eating habits that set early Sufis apart as a specific social group? How are the renunciatory customs of *zuhd* reflected in early Sufi food culture? How, in the face of the self-starvation and strict veganism documented in early Sufism, can we explain the fact that the enjoyment of luxury foods became a mark of the sublime spiritual state of 'arrival' (*wuṣūl, intihā*) in later Sufi writings? In what way did the early Sufis relate to food? When did they begin to devote separate sections to this topic in their writings and what does this indicate with respect to how they perceived it? How does early Sufi food culture fit with the traditional Islamic tenet that God allows human beings to enjoy all permissible food pleasures?

This paper is part of the continuing scholarly interest that developed during the last decades of the 20th century on the subject of the multifarious roles played by Sufis as social actors in different times and places of the Islamic world. While the first generation of researchers in the field of Sufi studies was more interested in the development of Sufi ideas and rituals, a new generation of researchers has begun moving the focus towards new horizons and has done research on the different social aspects in the lives and activities of Sufis.³ As noted above, this paper addresses two dimensions: the individual nutritional domain and the cultivation of eating habits within a communal setting in the form of Sufi banquets. We shall examine in particular how these banquets became popular during the 4th/10th century and onwards, becoming influential practical frameworks in which Sufi theoretical systems and networks and relationships developed.

³ For an overall presentation of this development in Sufi studies, see e.g., Knysh (2006: 217–226) and the references provided there for an outline of the historical evolution of Sufi studies in western academia. A recent example of this social approach is the pioneering volume of Erik Ohlander and John Curry (2012).

2. Eating Customs in Early Sufi Writings

Although early Sufi authors all gave the issue of food a prominent place in their writings, they treated it in varied ways. In analysing the divergences between them, we must determine whether their statements reflect the historical period during which they lived.

In his ethical brief manual *Riyādat al-nafs*, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. ca. 300/910) discusses the self-starvation techniques a Sufi should practise. At the beginning of his spiritual career, each aspirant must train himself to fast for two months. Thereby he will enable himself to repent of his previous sins. After this period of fasting, he must then reduce his food intake, gradually dividing the one meal to which he restricts himself into morsels he consumes throughout the day (*tajazzu*). Significantly, Tirmidhī adduces contemporaneous medical conceptions in support of this argument. The technique, he says, is much celebrated by physicians: *wa-innamā dhālika maḥmūdun ‘inda al-aṭibbā*’ (al-Tirmidhī 2005: 53). He also urges avoidance of all kinds of oily bouillons (typically eaten with bread) and fruit (*yaqṭa ‘u al-idāma wa-l-fawākiha ‘an nafsihi*) (al-Tirmidhī 2005: 53). As we shall see below, fruit, meat, and fish are frequently associated with lustful desires deriving from the lower soul in early Sufi literature.

Focusing on individual consumption techniques, Tirmidhī makes no reference to communal eating customs.⁴ In contrast, Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) addresses the communal feature of Sufi eating customs—the Sufis’ gatherings for meals, devoting a section to this topic in a fascinating chapter of his *Kitāb al-luma*—*Bāb mā dhukira min ādābihim fī waqti al-ṭā‘āmi wa-l-ijtimā‘āti wa-l-ḍiyāfāt* (see al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914: 182–186). This opens with a quote from the great Baghdadi master Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 298/910):

[God’s] mercy is bestowed upon the poor—that is, the *ṣūfiyya*—on three occasions: during their meals, since they do not eat except when on the point of starvation; during their assemblies to discuss [Sufi] science (*mujārāt al-‘ilm*), since they do not discuss anything other than the spiritual states of the pious and friends of God; and during *samā’* gatherings, since they do not listen [to anyone] except God and do not move save by an [intense] ecstasy (*lā yaqūmūna illā bi-wajd*). [al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914: 182–183.] (The English translation is mine—A.Q.)

Junayd first relates to Sufi gatherings around the meal. Communal meals serve as the principal occasion upon which Sufis can gain God’s mercy and grace. Eating etiquette in early Sufism revolves around gatherings and collective activities. In this regard, it is commensurate with two other communal rituals that played a seminal role in establishing the collective identity of the early *ṣūfiyya*—congregating to discuss Sufi theories (*mujārāt al-‘ilm*) and *samā’* gatherings. The first forms the topic Sarrāj treats in the chapter preceding his discussion of Sufi dining etiquette—‘A Section on Sufi

⁴ The later Ḥanbalite jurist and prolific author Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) cites al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī and the nutritional doctrine he propounds (see Ibn al-Jawzī 1994: 274).

Ethics during the Discussion of Sufi Science' (*Bāb fī dhikri ādābihim 'inda mujārāti al-'ilm*) (see al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914: 179–182). I suggest that according to Sarrāj, *mujārāt al-'ilm* pertains to assembling over meals to debate Sufi theories and practices. On certain occasions, these could deteriorate into arguments and disputes. In his chapter on Sufi science, for example, Sarrāj records that Abū Bakr al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī ibn Yazdāniyār once heard Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥuṣṭī (d. 371/981) make an ambiguous statement during a discussion of Sufi science. Not understanding Ḥuṣṭī's statement, Abū Bakr asked him to repeat it—which Ḥuṣṭī refused to do (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914: 180). Ibn Yazdāniyār, interestingly, was known for his problematic relationships with the Sufis of his days. Sarrāj intended to show how far this personality was from the knowledge of the great Sufi masters of his days, and to what extent his attempts to contest their theories, as documented in the works of both Sarrāj and Sulamī, were motivated by his covetousness of leadership and social fame.⁵

Rather than seeking to instruct his Sufi fellows in consumption exercises, Sarrāj's interest lies in the experience of communal dining and its links with other ritual practices such as *samā'* and the discussion of Sufi science. All three of these activities could be combined. Under such circumstances, the collective-identity discourse assumes significant status. Sarrāj does not object to the ingestion of large quantities of food during Sufi gatherings. In his view, this in fact attests to the grace God bestows upon the pious who gather together, such assemblage serving as the occasion for God to open up other sources of sustenance (*futūḥ*) to them (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914: 183).

Sarrāj also addresses the issue of *inbisāt*. Literally signifying 'enjoyment', this term also signifies the discarding of modesty and inhibition. Sharing a meal enables Sufi brothers to become unselfconscious and unembarrassed in the presence of their companions. On such occasions, they are no longer governed by the common etiquette of food hospitality—urging one another to eat. According to Sarrāj, the principle of inviting people to eat embodies two spiritual tenets. Each Sufi aspirant being required to regard himself as a guest in this world, accepting hospitality affords him an excellent opportunity for doing so. Meals also provided Sufis with occasions for learning Sufi manners, imitating the example of others. This was a more effective method of imbibing Sufi ethics than gathering to discuss Sufi theories (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914: 185).

Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's two extensive chapters on early Sufi eating customs in his *Qūt al-qulūb* arguably constitute the most detailed description of early Sufi food practices (al-Makkī 2001).⁶ As we shall see below, al-Makkī would appear to be the first Sufi author to outline practical techniques that allowed aspirants to reduce intake to a minimum while still maintaining their renunciatory lifestyle and retaining sufficient strength to perform their religious rites. Al-Makkī seems to be more aware of the nutritional realities of his contemporaries than any other Sufi author of his day. This is reflected in the very title of his work—*The Nourishment of Hearts*. Unlike Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī, whose chapter on Sufi eating manners is less specific and

⁵ See a detailed reference to this personality in Salamah-Qudsi 2018: 198–211.

⁶ The only full translation of this in a modern European language is that of Richard Gramlich (1992).

more elitist, al-Makkī's discourse is eminently pragmatic and closely attuned to the social and cultural conventions of the period.⁷

Although the anonymous 4th/10th-century author of *Adab al-mulūk* devotes two chapters to Sufi eating customs—'Chapter on Sufi Nutrition' (*Bāb Akli al-Ṣūfiyya*) (24) and 'Chapter on Accepting Sufi Meal Invitations' (*Bāb Ijābati al-Da'wati li-l-Ṣūfiyya*) (25)—he also relates to the topic elsewhere. In his treatment of Sufi truths (*Bāb Haqā'iqi al-Ṣūfiyya*), for example, he addresses nutrition (*maṭ'ūm*) in the context of renunciatory detachment (*zuhd*). Here, he quotes Abū Bakr al-Shiblī, who classifies Sufis in accordance with the self-starvation techniques they practise. Those who attain the highest degree of spirituality have no need for bread or other basic nutritional elements. On a lower level are those who are able to refrain from eating for two days, satisfy their appetite on the third day, and then repeat the process. Another group are vegans. 'Abd Allāh al-Maghribī (d. 279/892), for example, ate nothing but herbs and drank water solely from wellsprings for thirty years (see Anonymous 1991: 17).⁸

In line with the prevalent early Sufi tradition of adducing three categories, the last of which constitutes the highest and most eminent, Chapter 24 divides Sufis into three groups on the basis of their eating customs. The lowest are those who, ensuring that they always have sufficient food sources (*ja'alū li-anfusihim qūtan ma'lūman*), continue to struggle against their lower soul's desire for food. These remain bound by the normative tenets of the religious law (Muslims in general being encouraged to work to support themselves and their families), social conventions, and common morality (*al-rusūm wa-l-'ādāt*).

The second level consists of Sufis who do not seek to guarantee victuals for themselves but are satisfied to eat what God sends them from time to time. These only work for food in extreme cases—when God does not send any nourishment—because they trust him implicitly (*ahl al-tawakkul*).

The third and most exalted group only eat when God supplies them with sustenance from His invisible world (*lā ya'kulūna illā mina al-ghayb*). These do not exert their own will on any occasion, God moving them as He wishes and feeding them according to His desire. This practice is closely tied to the tradition of the Prophet Muḥammad's intimacy with God, exemplified by God's provision of food and water to him. As Abū Hurayra records, 'The Prophet prevented his companions from performing *muwāṣala* (fasting over several days). One man said to him: 'But you yourself perform it!' The Prophet answered: 'Who of you is like me? I spend my nights with God feeding and watering me' (al-Bukhārī 1422: Vol. 3, 29). According to this tradition, the Prophet felt sated without eating and drinking normally. Because this state was only granted to him, he directed that no one else should even engage in *muwāṣala*. Valerie Hoffman examines the different and even contradictory traditions that hint at the Prophet's approaches towards fast. His engagement in continuous fasts harmonises with another tradition according to which he tied a stone against his stomach as to endure hunger. Other traditions, however, tell that the Prophet frequently

⁷ Comparing Makkī with his contemporaries, Saeko Yazaki (2013: 88) asserts that, unlike Sarrāj in his *Kitāb al-luma'*, for example, Makkī provides a detailed account of everyday actions.

⁸ For al-Maghribī, see al-Sulamī 1960: 238–241.

asserted that the best fast is one that is regularly broken (Hoffman 1995: 467–468). The author of *Adab al-mulūk* cites this tradition and its context in support of his claim that the Sufis in this group possess such a level of spirituality that they feel satiated while self-starving themselves. Although, according to the sources the Prophet has told his companions that they cannot enjoy such a state as his, this Sufi author had no hesitation in claiming that true Sufis can also be fed and watered by God Himself, not needing any human food. These Sufis regard God as their sole provider. Even if they receive bounty from others, they believe this to come from God's own hand.

For the Sufis in the second and third groups, who stop working for an income and live in an absolute state of *tawakkul*, meal invitations are a crucial necessity. Chapter 25 addresses precisely this topic. Despite its brevity, this two-paragraph chapter is of great significance, presenting a pragmatic method for dealing with the consequences of *tawakkul*. Participation in banquets given by their fellows releases Sufis from the need to look for and prepare food themselves—the host also being rewarded for his beneficence.

According to the 4th/10th-century author of *Adab al-mulūk*, such banquets formed the primary occasion on which Sufis ate: *aklu al-da'awāti min ghālibi aḥwāli al-ṣūfiyya* (Anonymous 1991: 63, line 17). They frequently also included other Sufi customs, such as learning sessions (*mudhākara*) and debates regarding Sufi science (*jarayān al-'ilm*), and *samā'*. This recalls al-Sarrāj's discussion of Sufi banqueting habits and the integration of eating, listening, and learning.⁹ The association between food and science/learning is strikingly evident at the end of Chapter 25. Due to its importance, I will quote the original and then offer an English translation:

wa-tajma'u da'awātu al-ṣūfiyyati ashyā'a ka-l-mudhākarati wa-jarayāni al-'ilmi wa-l-samā'i, thumma ta'qubuhā asratu al-'āmmati wa-raqhbatuhum fī iqāmati sunani al-mursalīna wa-l-nabiyyīna wa-badhli al-ṭa'āmi li-sā'iri al-fuqarā'i min al-mu'minīna, thumma man yara al-salāmata fī al-imsāki 'anhā li-fasādi al-zamāni wa-li-l-mubāhāti bihā wa-wujūdi aṭyaba minhā bi-l-tanakkubi 'anhā fa-lahu dhālika bi-sharṭi al-iqrāri bihā annahā sunnatun mu'akkadatun wa-amrun qadīm. (Anonymous 1991: 64, lines 6–9)

Sufi banquets blend together [several] things—such as learning and discussing [Sufi] science and listening to music, and they are followed by the attraction of the common people who wish to observe the traditions of the messengers and Prophets, generously offering food to the poor amongst the believers. He who thinks that it is safer not to engage in this [practice of holding or partaking in banquets] because of the corruption of this period and the tendency to make it the grounds for boasting, or because of the belief that other customs are better—may do so on

⁹ Sarrāj employs the term *mujārāt al-'ilm* rather than *jarayān al-'ilm*. Although both derive from the root *jry* 'stream,' *mujārāt* suggests a mutual flowing. This fits the context of Sufis meeting together over meals to exchange ideas and experiences.

condition that he acknowledges that it is a supererogation and eternal [divine] command.

This passage affirms the existence of a widespread banqueting culture in 4th/10th-century Sufism. These meals appear to have been well-attended, mass events. The practice rests on the tradition of the Prophet regarding the socio-religious value of accepting invitations to dine and the *Qur'ānic* verse according to which God calls upon those whom he created to believe in Him (Yūnus 10.25). Sufis who participate in banquets observe the former and call to mind the latter. Some questioned the need for banquets, however, arguing that they lived in a very different period to that of the Prophet, the custom being exploited for illegitimate purposes, such as boasting and self-glorification on the part of the hosts. This notion evinces that mass banqueting became a prevalent practice early on, many Sufis subsisting on alms and communal meals.

This text indicates how banquets are capable of pushing forward a cyclic social activity. When a Sufi hosted a banquet for his colleagues, this prompted another Sufi—or even non-Sufi member of the common people (*‘amma*)—wishing to follow the Prophetic tradition to hold his own and invite the Sufi poor to eat. This in turn encouraged others to imitate his example. It also makes it clear that the banquets were attended by Sufis and non-Sufis alike. Non-Sufis wishing for a spiritual blessing (*baraka*) could hold a banquet for Sufis at which they could share experiences and knowledge, and develop networks and relationships (see e.g., al-Kharkūshī 1999, 293 and 530). Sufi sources attribute several anecdotes to Abū ‘Alī al-Rūdhbārī (d. 322/934) reflecting such behaviour. According to one, he bought a large quantity of sugar, asking the confectioners to prepare a maquette of a wall striated with balconies and niches the Sufis consumed *in toto* (see al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914: 185; al-Kharkūshī 1999, 297; al-Ghazālī n.d.: Vol. 2, 30).

The author of *Adab al-mulūk* emphasises that banquets formed an occasion for fostering friendship (*ulfa*) and comradeship, enabling Sufis to dispense with faked manners and enjoy an intimacy imbued with cheerfulness and delight (*inbisāṭ*). Not surprisingly, in the following section he proceeds to discuss the latter (*Bāb Inbisāṭi al-Ṣūfiyya*), exemplified by joking (*muzāḥ*) and being bright-faced (*bashāsha*) with one's fellows. This progression follows a logical pattern, sharing a meal traditionally forming the foundation for solid relationships in ancient Arab culture. In his *Kitāb al-imtā‘ wa-l-mu‘ānasa*, for example, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023) cites Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778), a renowned renunciant and jurist who lived in Kūfa, as saying: ‘If I meet a man and he greets me, my heart becomes soft—all the more so the man on whose mat I step, from whose *tharīd*¹⁰ I eat (*ākulu tharīdahū*), and whose gruel I swallow’ (al-Tawḥīdī 2007: 314). This statement highlights the role sharing meals played in nurturing and developing relationships between the early Sufis who were primarily influenced by the mode of piety conducted by earlier renunciants such as Sufyān al-

¹⁰ *Tharīd* (or *tharīda*) is crumbled bread soaked in meat broth. In her fascinating work on medieval cuisine of the Islamic world, Lilia Zaouali (2007: 68) indicates that *tharīd* was a national dish of the Arabs in the early years of Islam, and that the Prophet Muḥammad declared it the best of all dishes.

Thawrī. According to Sarrāj, offering food to a poor guest effectively signalled a person's wish to become a Sufi (al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī 1914: 183).

In the following section, we shall examine Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's contribution to this discussion in his *Qūt al-qulūb* and the unique features of his treatment of the subject.

3. Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī on Sufi Eating Customs

Al-Makkī's *Qūt al-qulūb* is a striking example of early Sufi guides for conduct. In my view, it constitutes the most important 4th/10th-century Sufi text on eating customs. Demonstrating an intimate knowledge of ancient and contemporaneous religious food cultures and eating practices, the two chapters that relate to food are unrivalled by any other Sufi work of his time. As Ibn al-Jawzī claimed two centuries later, al-Makkī's detailed guidelines for consuming food and spacing intake over time intervals form the classic treatment of the subject (Ibn al-Jawzī 1994: 274).

Chapter 39 outlines practical methods for reducing food intake and organising meal times so that, while leaving him hungry longer, the Sufi's body can cope with the lack of food, enabling him to perform his religious rites and maintain his devotional lifestyle. Chapter 40 recommends various types of food and the rules of conduct governing them. In detailing the physical and psychological mechanisms of these two techniques, al-Makkī employs arithmetical devices to guide Sufi aspirants in cutting down on the amount of food they eat. He suggests that aspirants cut down a quarter of one seventh of a loaf of bread every day so that after twenty-eight days they can cut out a whole loaf. This gradual reduction allows them to train their bodies to become accustomed to less food and tolerate longer intervals between meals.

Spacing out meals also helps increase endurance. Aspirants should strive to eat only when they become completely unable to perform their religious duties or feel that their mental capacities are under seriously threat. He also recommends that aspirants delay breaking their fast until halfway through the seventh of the night, i.e. one-fourteenth of the way through. Hereby, they will be able to fast a whole night every half a month. This exercise, known as *ṭayy*, can be practised for seven, ten, fifteen, or even forty consecutive days. The ability to perform it depends on the level of endurance the Sufi aspirant succeeds in reaching through training.

Al-Makkī (2001: Vol. 3, 1373) cites ancient medical practices in order to explain how spacing out meals can help reduce food intake, asserting that the intestine narrows (*mi'āhu taḍīqu lā maḥāla*) the longer the next meal is delayed. This type of a voluntary self-starvation was practised in various cultural contexts and historical timeframes, existing long before the 19th-century diagnosis of anorexia (Bemporad 1996: 217–237). Although the Sufis of al-Makkī's day—and perhaps even earlier—were significantly influenced by the model of fasting imposed by Muslim law, they followed their own path and fashioned their own principles. Thus in contrast to the ritual termination of the fast in Islam—i.e., breaking the fast with a feast—Sufi self-starvation is designed to attain mental and physical satiation through a bare minimum

of food intake. It thus serves as an essential vehicle for withdrawing from the material world.

In ancient Indian Jainism, self-starvation could lead to death. Vardhamana, the sect's founder (or most famous reformer), reportedly died after undertaking such a regime in the 6th century BCE. Thereby he became an exemplar for his followers (Bemporad 1996: 218). It also forms one of the principal means for attaining enlightenment in Buddhism (Bemporad 1996: 218). While we cannot establish whether and to what extent such ancient beliefs influenced early Sufis, Islam as a faith and mode of life self-evidently does not promote self-starvation, denouncing those who believe that the body is separate from the soul and can thus be tortured. According to Muslim law, this view is a misinterpretation of the authority people wield over their bodies—the false belief that absolute control permits them to inflict pain and suffering. Some *Qur'ānic* commentators base this tenet on the verse in Al-Baqarah 2.195: 'And spend in the way of Allāh and do not throw [yourselves] with your [own] hands into destruction. And do good; indeed, Allāh loves the doers of good.'¹¹ *Al-Nisā'* 4.29 refers to the divine prohibition against killing oneself. Several Prophetic traditions firmly established as reliable in the great *ḥadīth* collections also declare that God forbids a person to torture himself through the performance of religious rituals such as prayer and fasting. According to one of these, the Prophet told his companions that a person is only required to stand during prayer as long as his body keeps him upright. When he can no longer stand, he should continue to pray sitting down (see al-Bukhārī 1422: *ḥadīth* No. 117, Vol. 3, 48).

The vast numbers of documented cases of female Christian saints in medieval Europe who appear to have practised self-starvation as a renunciatory technique have led some psychologists and historians of religion to speak of 'holy anorexia' (Bell 1985; Bynum 1987). Chapter 39 of al-Makkī's *Qūt al-qulūb* represents the early budding of this phenomenon in Islam, attesting to the existence of an extreme form of 'holy anorexia' regulated by an impressively detailed system that not only legitimises fasting but transforms it into a central pillar of Sufism.

In contrast to medieval Europe, the Sufī custom was generally practised by men. Some female Sufis who practised self-starvation and long periods of fasting are known, appearing in early Sufī hagiographies. Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (1999: 35), for example, reports in his *Dhikr al-niswa al-muta'abbidāt al-ṣūfiyyāt* that Mu'ādha bint 'Abd Allāh al-'Adawiyya, a close companion of the renowned Rābi'a

¹¹ According to the traditional understanding, this verse relates to a group of Muslims who refrained from spending their money 'in the way of God'—i.e., spreading and defending His religion. God thus commands His followers to ward off destruction by giving all their money and property to the waging of religious war against infidels (*jihād*). A tradition cited by al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122) and attributed to Zayd ibn Aslam (d. 136/753) states that some of the Prophet's contemporaries used to take part in Muslim military campaigns without taking any money, many thus not being able to continue or becoming dependent upon their fellows. God therefore commanded them to take provisions with them or, where this was impossible, to avoid participating in military campaigns that might expose them to extreme hunger, fatigue, or death; see al-Baghawī (n.d.) <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=2&tTafsirNo=13&tSoraNo=2&tAyahNo=195&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

al-‘Adawiyya of Baṣra, ate only one meal a day—at night. An insane female Sufi (*majnūna*) by the name of Dhakkāra is said to have criticised someone holding a piece of *fālūdhaj*—a type of dessert made from flour, water, and honey—on a holy day, going so far as to ask him to replace it with a spiritual dessert of pious morals (al-Sulamī 1999: 83). The biographical accounts of female Sufis focus primarily on weeping and grief rather than hunger, however (al-Sulamī 1999: 83; Silvers 2015: 24–52).

Al-Makkī asserts that Sufis knew that they had reached the ultimate degree of hunger when they spat on the ground and their saliva attracted no insects. This was a sign that their stomachs were entirely empty of food and that they had attained the pinnacle of hunger. This technique recalls the ancient practices of self-starvation found in Indian religious sects and later amongst the Mediterranean Gnostics of the Hellenistic world (Witztum et al. 2016: 170–171). His text constitutes the most authoritative 4th/10th-century Sufi work on eating customs. In these chapters, he criticises general Muslim fasting practices, arguing that these neither train the Sufi to control his lustful desires, nor prompt him to maintain a devotional lifestyle. In his view, these practices in fact cater to a person’s appetites by allowing him to overeat after he breaks his fast. Hereby, they also potentially foster in him a sense of laziness (*kasal*) and torpor (*subāt*). Such fasts thus relate to ‘people of this world who indulge in luxuries’ (*ṣawmu abnā’i al-dunyā al-mutrafin*) rather than those who ‘renounce this world for the next’ (*ahlu al-ākhirati al-zāhidīn*) (al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1375–1377). He also observes that delaying the breaking of the ritual fast until daybreak (*saḥar*) contradicts well-known Prophetic traditions that hold that people should hasten to break the fast (*ta jīlu al-iftār*), eating before daybreak (*ta khīru al-suḥūr*). He likewise addresses the question of whether it is better to keep a store of food to look forward to while a person fasts or to have no idea what and where he will eat at the end of day. The Sufis of Baghdad preferred the former practice, those of Baṣra the latter. Al-Makkī himself tends towards the Baghdadi Sufis’ doctrine of depending absolutely on God (*tawakkul*) (al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1378).

Al-Makkī appears to have intended dividing his treatment of eating/fasting into two principal sections, the first dedicated to individual practices of eating and starvation, the second to communal aspects—Sufi banquets. His interest in the former contrasts sharply with that of his Sufi contemporaries Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, the anonymous author of *Adab al-mulūk*, and ‘Abd al-Malik al-Kharkūshī (d. 407/1016), who sought to explain the spiritual rationale behind issuing meal invitations and the ethical code governing them. His discussion of individual self-starvation techniques also falls into two parts—self-starvation strategies and the occasions upon which Sufis are allowed to eat whatever they desire in order to purify themselves of self-conceit and insincerity. The latter forms a bridge to his treatment of communal Sufi life and meals.

At the end of Chapter 39, he notes that Sufis should resist the temptation of consuming foods like fruit for their pleasurable aspect (*tafakkuh*) rather than to meet a purely physical need. In general, they should struggle against their lower soul and its craving after such luxuries. Rather than doing so in public, however, where others can see them being overwhelmed by their passions, they should permit themselves a

predetermined amount in order not to exploit the struggle to gain attention or esteem (al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1396–1397).

Al-Makkī's discussion of the types of food Sufis eat on diverse occasions and in various spiritual and physical circumstances is sandwiched between his treatment of self-starvation techniques and communal Sufi eating practices. In both Chapters 39 and 40, he names disparate types of food. Those he cites in Chapter 39 largely pertain to individual lifestyles, those in Chapter 40 relating primarily to Sufi banquets. Sufis frequently carried *sawīq* 'fine flour' with them on their peregrinations, because it was light-weight and easy to preserve (al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1480). Mixed with water, milk, or oil, it can be made into a satiating form of food. Individuals also consumed bread mixed with vinegar or salt. Ibn al-Sā'ī (1936: 49) (d. 674/1275), for example, observes that when al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922) ate bread, he did so only with vinegar and salt. Al-Makkī (2001: Vol. 3, 1381) also refers to dates and raisins—healthy yet calculable nutritional ingredients that enable the Sufi to precisely measure his intake during the performance of his devotional exercises. Wheat and its derivatives also figure prominently in this context.

Like al-Tirmidhī, al-Makkī adduces medical explanations in guiding the aspirant towards what he should eat and what he should avoid in specific physical situations. In his view, those preoccupied with their sexual appetites should avoid consuming both hot/dry and cold/wet foods, favouring cold stuffs such as vinegar and wheat. Pomegranates and citron (*utrujj*), he says, also serve as normothymotic mood-normalisers that help dampen sexual instincts (Al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1385–1387). Medieval Muslim pharmacists and physicians believed *utrujj* (*citrus medica*), a fragrant citrus fruit, possessed numerous medical qualities. Ibn al-Bayṭār (d. 646/1248), for example, asserts that it cools the liver, strengthens the stomach, and is an antidote to scorpion bites (see Ibn al-Bayṭār 1992: Vol. 1, 13–14).¹²

The principal challenge early Sufis faced was how to decrease food intake while allowing their bodies to continue functioning. Al-Makkī lays out several principles for achieving this goal. Aspirants should avoid engaging in sexual intercourse or going to bed shortly after eating (al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1391). While they are not required to completely abjure meat, they should only eat it twice a month. In this way, they can find a *via media* between the two extremes. If they wish to eat fruit, they should consume it instead of bread, using it to satiate themselves. In this way, rather than enjoying luxury goods (*tafakkuh*), they only eat them as a way of satisfying their hunger. Dates should be eaten first to satiate oneself before bread is consumed (al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1392). If dates and fruit become dainties desired by their lower soul, they should renounce them altogether (al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1393). This advice recalls numerous anecdotes in early Sufi literature about Sufi figures who, crav-

¹² The alleged connections between food habits and one's spiritual and physical health have always been represented in many traditional societies including Islam. The references to these connections in the writings of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, particularly in his *Riyādat al-naḥs*, left a deep influence on one of the most important thinkers in the *ṭarīqa* of Shādhiliyya, Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 1309 AD). For a thorough discussion of the spiritual implications of food ingestion in Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh's thought with echoes of al-Tirmidhī's thoughts therein, see Cecere 2014: 219–224.

ing specific types of food, abstained from them—being rewarded with them in the afterlife (al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1394). Here, al-Makkī (2001: Vol. 3, 1393) criticises contemporary scholars of Muslim law for seeking to satisfy their own lusts, thereby failing in their ethical and religious duty towards the common people by failing to instruct them on how to resist the desires of their souls.

On various occasions, his discussion of Sufi eating manners is informed by his theoretical system. In Chapter 39, for instance, he asserts that Sufi aspirants should relinquish their desire to eat particular kinds of food in public in order to keep their spiritual qualities hidden from people's eyes. In doing the opposite of what is expected of them in this regard, they may prompt people to think that they are not true renunciants (al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1399).

At the end of Chapter 39, al-Makkī offers numerous anecdotes relating to communal Sufi meals and the spiritual merit attendant upon them. Hereby, he lays the foundations for the following chapter. Therein, he remarks that *tharīd* is better than other kinds of cooked food, because it is eaten from a common same bowl (al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1409). He attributes the tradition according to which 'The best kind of food is that which calls for many hands' to the Prophet.¹³ The more hands that share a meal, the greater the divine benediction bestowed upon them, especially if those gathered together also engage in pious conversation. His frequent references to this principle suggest that some Sufis chose to devote themselves to a devotional life of extreme self-starvation by avoiding all communal events and public exposure. In praising *tharīd* and other types of food that involve sharing, al-Makkī extols the communal spirit of Sufism of his days, at the same time cautioning individuals against isolating themselves. Both ways of life can be followed, in his view, one not excluding the other.

This attitude embodies the spirit of 4th/10th-century Sufism. Sufis who adopted extreme practices of starvation and frequent fasting could also attend banquets without fear of being condemned for violating one of the pillars of their devotional life. Like some of his contemporaries, al-Makkī contends that breaking one's fast in honour of one's pious brethren by sharing a meal with them is more commendable than continuing to fast and thus showing disrespect to them (Hoffman 1995: 475).

Chapter 40 lays out the ethical rules governing the sharing of meals in great detail. Its contents give the impression that eating formed an important realm wherein Sufi doctrines were implemented in daily life. One of those who taught these was Farqad ibn Ya'qūb al-Sabakhī (d. 131/749), an early renunciant of Baṣra and associate of the renowned al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728). He adopted a strict food regime, renouncing sweets such as *fālūdḥaj* on the grounds that if he enjoyed them, he would not be able to praise God properly. According to al-Makkī, he exemplifies the opposite school of piety to that represented by his colleague who, despite his zeal for the early tradition of *zuhd*, allowed himself food luxuries: '*kāna al-Ḥasanu yattasi 'u fī al-ṭa'ām*' (al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1418).

¹³ This tradition does not appear in any of the six *ḥadīth* collections.

Al-Makkī's reference to different approaches in early Sufism is of great importance. In adducing the early 2nd/8th-century Farqad al-Sabakhī and al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and the various attitudes towards *zuhd* that existed during this period, he associates this diversity with that of his own day.

Al-Makkī lays out in minute detail the way in which Sufi aspirants should behave at banquets—how they should commence the meal, what they should say to their fellow diners, what conduct they should abjure, how they should sit, what they should choose from the menu, and how each element should be consumed. Should they use three or all five fingers to eat *tharīd*, for example? In his view, they should forswear silence and engage in discussion of issues of piety (al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1412). Dates, butter, and honey are to be favoured (al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1417). Since drinking water helps a person cut down on food intake, it plays a major role (al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1419).

Al-Makkī also makes numerous statements of a general anthropological nature. These serve as a rich source for data for anthropologists of medieval Islam and those interested in the food cultures of this period. The preference for expensive rather than cheap food, he says, explains why people eat more Khurāsānian pears than carrots or green beans—or truffles more than eggplants (al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1419–1420). Some people, he also notes, eat while walking or in the market, claiming that, as a worldly act, consumption should be undertaken in places symbolising this realm (al-Makkī 2001: Vol. 3, 1460–1461).

Chapter 40 details the ethical principles governing Sufi banquets. It is thus a lengthy section. Herein, al-Makkī cites diverse forms of literature, gathering a vast array of literary, historical, anthropologic, cultural, religious, and medical data. Despite the focus on communal Sufi meals, the text covers a wide range of material. It clearly demonstrates how food served a prominent role in 4th/10th-century Sufism, functioning as a framework for the coexistence of diverse modes of piety. Some individuals chose self-starvation techniques to challenge the formal system of fasting,¹⁴ others celebrated meals as an occasion for engaging in communal forms of piety. Sharing meals constituting one of the three pillars of communal spiritual life—group meals, ritual *samā'*, and discussion of Sufi theories—these can be perceived as playing a seminal role in the crystallisation of early collective Sufi identity.

4. Conclusion

Studying food culture affords us a way of reconstructing one of the pillars of early Sufi practice. Prior to the 4th/10th century, Sufis' interest in food had centred around the individual and the ways in which he could minimise his intake and purify him-

¹⁴ Food habits and norms served particular Sufis to establish a sense of self-consciousness of their identity as a distinctive group from non-Sufi Muslims. G. Cecere suggests to use Micheal Foucault's term '*pratiques divisantes*' (dividing practices) to indicate the role that food habits played in the lives of Shādhilī Sufis and their attempts to differentiate themselves from non-Muslims during the time of Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh al-Iskandarī (see Cecere 2013: 196).

self. Attention during the 4th/10th century began to focus upon communal invitations to meals. Sharing meals constitutes one of the three pillars of communal spiritual life in addition to ritual *samāʿ* and sessions dedicated to the discussion of Sufi theories—these can be perceived as playing a seminal role in the establishment of Sufi collective identity. Gatherings around meals provided a more effective method of imbibing Sufi ethics than gathering to discuss Sufi theories. Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī appears to be the first Sufi author to outline practical techniques that allow aspirants to reduce intake to a minimum while still retaining sufficient strength to perform their religious rites. His discourse was shown to be more pragmatic and closely attuned to the social and cultural conventions of his period than other contemporary authors. A close reading of his work leaves the impression that the foundations of early Sufi devotion were set during banquets. The rich data presented in his two long chapters on eating manners are not restricted to the Sufi domain and provide an excellent basis for anthropological study of early medieval Islam whose focus is food fashions.

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