The Relationship Between Khorasani Mysticism and Andalusian Mysticism in the Medieval Period (12th Century CE): A Historical Comparative Study of the Thought of Ibn ʿArabī and Sanāʾī

1. Valiollah. Saki [1] : Assistant Professor, Department of Religions and Mysticism, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran
2. Sarvat. Soleimanzadeh Afshar [2*]: Assistant Professor, Department of History and Civilization of Islamic Nations, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran
3. Nasrin. Tavakoli [3]: Assistant Professor, Department of Religions and Mysticism, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran

*corresponding author's email: servatafshar@pnu.ac.ir

ABSTRACT

This study aims to provide a historical and comparative explanation of the relationship between Khorasani mysticism and Andalusian mysticism in the 12th century CE, with a focus on the intellectual contributions of Sanāʾī and Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī. Despite the considerable geographical and cultural distance between eastern Khorasan and western al-Andalus, the mystical current in both regions emerged within the shared developments of the Islamic world, including the expansion of Sufi networks, the dynamism of scholarly centers, and the role of trade routes and pilgrimage in transmitting religious concepts. Sanāʾī, situated in the tradition of Khorasani mysticism, articulated an ethics-oriented and reformist mysticism in which religious experience, critique of political authority, and spiritual cultivation were central. In contrast, Ibn ʿArabī—shaped by the multicultural environment of al-Andalus and later the eastern Islamic lands—founded a theoretical and universal mysticism in which concepts such as waḥdat al-wujūd (unity of being), the perfect human, and the imaginal realm (ʿālam al-mithāl) assumed foundational significance. Through a comparative analysis of the shared and distinctive elements of the two mystical traditions—including the concept of love, the status of the human being, the linguistic modes of mystical expression, and the relationship between mysticism and political power—this article demonstrates that the intellectual similarities between Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī are not the result of direct influence, but rather the product of broader civilizational transformations and the internal coherence of the Islamic mystical tradition. Ultimately, the article concludes that the relationship between the two traditions is one of "civilizational overlap": Sanāʾī inaugurates the stream of ethical Khorasani mysticism, while Ibn ʿArabī constitutes the architect of theoretical mysticism in both the western and eastern Islamic worlds.

Keywords: *Sanāʾī; Ibn ʿArabī; Khorasani mysticism; Andalusian mysticism; historical comparison*

Introduction

The 12th century CE was one of the decisive periods in the development of Islamic mysticism; an era in which, both in the eastern and western regions of the Islamic world, spiritual, intellectual, and literary movements reached a stage of maturation and transformation that later shaped the trajectory of theoretical and literary mysticism for several centuries. In eastern Khorasan, the cultural and religious characteristics of the region—such as the

presence of the Nizamiya schools, theological disputes between the Ashʿarites and the Muʿtazilites, and the prevalence of ascetic Sufism—created a context in which Sanāʾī introduced a new visage of mysticism, elevating it from the level of asceticism and moral exhortation to a poetic and pedagogical system (1, 2). On the other side of the Islamic world, al-Andalus—marked by the coexistence of Islamic, Christian, and Jewish cultures and by the flourishing of philosophy and the rational sciences—provided a different environment for the growth of Sufi thinkers; an environment in which Ibn ʿArabī, as one of the greatest theorists of Islamic mysticism, succeeded in establishing a coherent system of ontology, anthropology, and mystical epistemology (3-5).

The fundamental difference between these two geographies—Khorasan, which was more deeply engaged with theology, poetry, and religious experience, and al-Andalus, which was shaped by philosophical thought and complex epistemic structures—has given rise to the central question of this research: How should the relationship between the two mystical traditions be understood? Did Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī follow entirely independent paths? Or did indirect influences emerge through Sufi networks and the cultural exchanges of the Islamic world? Or should the relationship between these two movements be explained instead as a form of "civilizational overlap," grounded in a shared spiritual horizon (6, 7)?

The historical significance of this question lies in the fact that Sanāʾī played a pivotal role in Khorasani mysticism by transforming it from a purely ascetic mode into a poetic mystical tradition—an era in which poetry became the primary medium for expressing inner experience and paved the way for ʿAṭṭār and Rūmī (8, 9). In contrast, Ibn ʿArabī, in al-Andalus and later in the eastern Islamic world, provided a theoretical foundation for mysticism that relied not on poetic experience but on philosophical-intuitive reflection and the systematic articulation of concepts such as the unity of being, the imaginal realm, and the perfect human (4, 10, 11).

The temporal distance between the two figures is also notable: Sanāʾī lived in the first half of the 12th century, whereas Ibn ʿArabī emerged in the second half of the same century and reached the height of his intellectual development in the 13th century. The geographical distance between Ghazna and al-Andalus, together with linguistic, cultural, and political differences, further highlights the need for a comparative study of the two traditions; for the similarities observed in concepts, themes, and mystical approaches—despite these distances—require historical explanation (12, 13).

Based on this, the present study rests on two main hypotheses. The first is that the similarities between Sanāʾī's and Ibn ʿArabī's mysticism are rooted less in direct influence and more in the shared civilizational context of the Islamic world—a context in which Sufi networks, circles of ḥadīth and religious sciences, and commercial and cultural routes, combined with the intellectual dynamism of Islamic cities, enabled the production of shared concepts (14, 15). The second hypothesis is that the differences between the two mystical traditions arise from the distinct intellectual and political environments of the two regions: in Khorasan, mysticism often positioned itself against political power and formal juridical-theological structures and advanced a discourse of ethical and social critique; whereas in al-Andalus, due to the dominance of philosophy and the multicultural composition of society, mysticism tended toward theoretical and universal formulations (16, 17).

The research method of this article is comparative-historical and relies on the simultaneous analysis of mystical texts and historical data. For this purpose, Sanāʾī's primary works—*Ḥadīqat al-Ḥaqīqah* and his *Dīwān*—have been examined as sources for understanding the foundations of Khorasani mysticism (18, 19), while Ibn ʿArabī's works—especially *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* and *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah*—have been analyzed as representatives of the theoretical mysticism of the Islamic West and East (4, 11).

Historical sources related to the cultural, political, and social conditions of Khorasan and al-Andalus in the 12th century have also been used to explain the contexts in which the two mystical movements emerged. The ultimate aim of this study is to present an accurate account of the relationship between the two traditions, to identify their points of convergence and divergence, and to clarify their respective roles in the broader development of Islamic mysticism.

1. The Historical–Cultural Background of 12th-Century Khorasan and the Formation of Sanāʾī's Mysticism

Twelfth-century Khorasan was one of the most turbulent yet intellectually dynamic centers of the Islamic world— an environment in which political, religious, and cultural transformations intertwined to create a unique basis for the flourishing of various intellectual movements, from theology and philosophy to Sufism and literature. In this setting, Khorasani mysticism was shaped not merely as a continuation of earlier ascetic traditions but as a new discourse centered on personal experience, spiritual ethics, and critique of political authority. Sanāʾī emerged as a decisive figure within these transformations—a poet who, by withdrawing from the royal court and turning to spiritual discipline, established new foundations for literary and pedagogical mysticism in Khorasan (2, 20).

In this regard, Sanāʾī writes in criticism of worldly power: "A king who becomes no king over hearts / in truth is a king without dignity in the world." (Ḥadīqa, ed. Modarres-e Razavi, Book 1) and also: "The dominion of this world is perishing, deception, and tale; the true king is he who is sovereign over the self and desire." (Ḥadīqa, Book 2).

Examining the historical and cultural setting of this period is essential for understanding the formation of Sanāʾī's thought and his place in the evolution of Islamic mysticism, for without considering the social-political conditions and intellectual transformations of the time, one cannot fully grasp the reasons for the appearance of Sanāʾī's mysticism or his influence on the subsequent trajectory of Khorasani Sufism (1, 9).

The Cultural–Political Conditions of Khorasan

The cultural–political landscape of 12th-century Khorasan can be understood as the product of three intersecting factors: the religious policies of powerful states, the institutionalization of higher learning in the form of Nizamiya schools, and the theological tensions that sharply polarized the intellectual climate of the period. The Ghaznavids and later the Seljuks, though differing in their intellectual orientations, both played decisive roles in strengthening religious and scholarly structures. The Ghaznavids, by supporting traditionalist currents and reinforcing juridical institutions, established a framework within which literature, preaching, and ascetic Sufism could continue to flourish—a structure that had already prepared the social context for Sanāʾī's critical thought (21).

Under the Seljuks, however, political centralization increased, and the state expanded its patronage of the scholarly class, strengthening the bond between authority and the production of religious knowledge and pushing Khorasan's intellectual space toward institutional cohesion and ideological control (2).

The emergence of the Nizamiya schools during this period was a turning point in the development of Khorasan's religious discourse. These institutions—directly supervised by the Seljuk administration—promoted Shafiʿi jurisprudence and Ashʿarite theology and thus established a new model of epistemic authority; one that led to the gradual marginalization of dissenting voices and the restriction of intellectual diversity (22).

This centralization not only organized the scholarly environment but also generated an ideological orientation toward concepts such as reason, interpretation, and inner experience—concepts later echoed in Sanāʾī's reaction to official religious structures (20).

In this setting, theological disputes among the Ashʿarites, Muʿtazilites, and Ismaʿilis became competitive and at times hostile. The dominance of Ashʿarism in the Nizamiya schools, alongside the presence of esoteric and Muʿtazilite currents at the margins of power, created a contentious arena in which debates on rationalism, scripturalism, and esotericism were not merely theoretical disagreements but part of broader struggles for political and religious legitimacy. This situation, as some researchers argue, provided fertile ground for the emergence of critical discourses to which Sanāʾī responded in his *Ḥadīqa*, offering a form of ethical-epistemic rethinking in the face of official discourse (23).

Sanāʾī, criticizing the sterile disputes of outward scholars and the "official science," explicitly describes this discourse as ineffective and distant from inner truth: "Formal knowledge is wholly argument and quarrel; no quality is gained from it, nor any state." (*Ḥadīqa*, Book 1).

Mystical Currents of Khorasan

The mystical currents of 12th-century Khorasan can be understood as the outcome of the continuation of earlier Khorasani asceticism and its transformation toward the formation of *literary Sufism*—a process that structurally linked the lived experiences of ascetics with the expressive frameworks of mystical poets (12, 13).

Khorasani asceticism, embodied in figures such as Abū Saʿīd Abū al-Khair and Abū al-Qāsim Qushayrī, offered a spiritual model in which simplicity of life, discipline, and focus on inner experience took precedence over theoretical reflection. Unlike the rationalist currents of Baghdad, this model emphasized the interiorization of the spiritual path and the existential dimension of mystical experience, thus defining mysticism as a "spiritual lifeworld" rather than merely a cognitive system.

Its close connection with literature also emerged from this structure, for the tradition regarded language not as an instrument of rational persuasion but as a channel for conveying states and mystical intuitions, enabling the development of poetic expression (19).

As this trajectory continued, Khorasani Sufism—because of its experiential and state-oriented nature—became more inclined than other mystical currents to merge with Persian poetry. Poetry, with its metaphorical and imaginative capacities, allowed mystical experience to rise from the level of conceptual description to that of image, symbol, and ambiguity. This was not merely a literary shift but an epistemic transformation in which meaning was generated through poetic language. Research has shown that Khorasani mysticism tended to perceive the world in terms of movement, inner temporality, and moment-based experience—elements that poetry could express more effectively than any other form (16).

Moreover, the influence of pre-Islamic spiritual traditions of Khorasan—in which concepts such as liberation, transcendence of linear time, and the primacy of inner experience played central roles—significantly reinforced the literary and intuitive tendencies of Sufism and led to the formation of a style that later reached its culmination in the works of Sanāʾī (15).

In the *Ḥadīqa*, Sanāʾī emphasizes the primacy of inner experience and liberation from the constraints of temporality and outwardness, vividly reflecting pre-Islamic spiritual traditions and Khorasani intuitive mysticism. As he states: "When you departed from the path of the world without station, your time became entirely the time of eternity," and also: "If you cannot grasp the heart's path in meaning, your outwardness is nothing but delusion and clay."

The Position of Sanāʾī within the Mystical Currents of Khorasan

The position of Sanāʾī within the mystical currents of Khorasan can be understood through the multi-layered interconnection between his personal transformation, the structural shifts embodied in the *Ḥadīqa*, and the redefinition of fundamental mystical concepts—a nexus that allows Sanāʾī not only to be regarded as a continuator of the Khorasani tradition, but also as the starting point of a new configuration within literary mysticism. His break with the court was not merely a biographical event but an epistemic signification, for by severing himself from a power-centered way of life, Sanāʾī constructs a new value-framework in which "asceticism" is no longer understood as withdrawal, but as a critique of the emptied structures of power (24). This rupture creates the possibility of moving beyond ceremonial ethics toward transformative ethics and turns the *Ḥadīqa* into a text in which repentance, spiritual discipline (riyāḍat), and purification (tahdhīb) acquire a systematic and critical structure. In the *Ḥadīqa*, Sanāʾī fashions a new structure for spiritual concepts—especially repentance, discipline, and purification—concepts that no longer possess merely formal or ritual dimensions but function as mechanisms of "inner transformation" and "critique of power." In criticizing superficial repentance, he says: "Repentance is not that you say, 'I have repented'; repentance is that a new doubt should arise in your heart."

In explaining the transformative nature of spiritual discipline, he composes:

"Spiritual discipline, O friend, is that for the sake of the Real

you cut yourself off from your self and set your heart on no desire."

He likewise considers purification to be the condition of any genuine spiritual path, where he says:

"As long as your soul is not cleansed of rancor and ill-nature,

the Path and the Truth will not be for you."

The innovations of the *Ḥadīqa* can be discerned not only at the level of content but also in its integrative mechanism that brings together poetic narration, rational argumentation, and mystical teachings. This work extends the tradition of advice literature (*andarz-nāmah*) into a mystical horizon and, by creating hierarchically ordered layers of meaning, places the reader before an epistemic geometry in which being, the degrees of existence, and the station of the human within the cosmic order are newly defined (1). In this way, by drawing on the theory of the hierarchy of beings, Sanāʾī understands the world as the field of human ethical and epistemic movement and analyzes each level in relation to the human being's capacity on the path toward perfection.

At the conceptual level, Sanāʾī organizes four axes—love, asceticism, reason, and the ethical perfect human—as elements of an interconnected system. Love, in his thought, is the driving force that elevates rational knowledge from conceptual cognition to intuitive experience; in this regard, the following verse of his is significant: "Reason finds no way to truth save through love; what knows the soul of the soul's speech? The speech of the soul of the soul is love." (Dīwān of Sanāʾī, *Ghazals*, "Reason and Love"). Yet this elevation is impossible without the presence of "refined reason," for Sanāʾī regards reason as the condition for distinguishing truth from illusion and considers it the prelude to intuitive perception (2). From this viewpoint, the ethical perfect human is the product of balance between love and reason—a human who, in an ascetic yet socially engaged space, devotes himself to self-purification and to reforming his relation with the world. Sanāʾī conceives of the perfect human as one who possesses both reason and love, and only through this equilibrium does he attain intuitive understanding and self-purification. As he states in the *Ḥadīqa*: "Reason and love, O friend, are both guides for you; without love, reason is no guide, without reason, love is no guide."

Moreover, the perfect human, contrary to the image proposed by some reclusive ascetics, plays a reformative and guiding role within society:

"The perfect human is not alone in the corner of seclusion;

rather, in the midst of people, he brings illumination and guidance."

In relation to the Khorasani Sufi tradition, Sanāʾī appears not as a mere follower but as a critic and reconstructer. He subjects the earlier ascetic teachings to a functional critique, purifies Sufism of its purely devotional layers, and reorients its value system toward transformative ethics. In addition, Sanāʾī transfers the domain of Sufism from the *khānaqāh* to language and from ascetic practice to thought, and by establishing a form of "literary mysticism," he makes possible a new formulation of religious experience—one that remains faithful to the Khorasani tradition while simultaneously pushing it toward redefinition and expansion (24). This dual position—critical fidelity—turns Sanāʾī into the link between Khorasani asceticism and later theoretical mysticism and grants him a unique place in the history of Sufism.

Sanāʾī as a Historical Transition

Within the overall development of Khorasani mysticism, Sanāʾī functions both as a point of rupture and as a point of linkage, a position that makes him a historical transition between ascetic Sufism and the poetic mysticism of ʿAṭṭār and Rūmī. This transition is not a simple transmission of heritage, but an epistemic displacement in which Sanāʾī, by transforming language, the structure of concepts, and the boundaries of mystical experience, prepares the ground for the emergence of these two great peaks of poetic mysticism. The *Ḥadīqa* is not merely a poetic text; it is a "semantic system" in which spiritual experience is elevated from the level of ethical recommendations to that of conceptual configuration, and this elevation later makes possible the expansion of ʿAṭṭār's and Rūmī's approaches (25). By linking ethical experience to a sacred worldview, Sanāʾī opens a field of meaning for a mysticism capable of explaining both the existential dimensions of the human being and the levels of reality within a coherent network—a network that later reaches its zenith in the narrative logic of ʿAṭṭār and Rūmī's eschatological universe.

This transition also occurs at the level of language. Sanāʾī transforms the Persian poetic language from a vehicle of mere admonition and gnomic wisdom into an instrument for articulating spiritual experience. His use of the "celestial court" and his afāqī–anfusī (cosmic–psychic) structuring of mystical concepts expand the metaphorical potential of language and make it possible for Persian poetry to become the bearer of mystical experience rather than simply its expressive tool. This linguistic achievement is directly reflected in the post-Sanāʾī tradition, especially in ʿAṭṭār, who, through allegorical and narrative patterns, bestows a new configuration on this expanded potential (14). Rūmī, too, elevates this language-making legacy to an ontological level and fashions from it a structure for expressing the "substantial motion" of the human being along the path of love.

Nonetheless, unlike the systematic theoretical mysticism that takes shape in the 13th century, particularly in the school of Ibn ʿArabī, Sanāʾī remains within the domain of "ethical experience." His distinctiveness lies precisely here: Sanāʾī does not explain being in order to construct a metaphysical system; rather, he reads being in order to redefine the ethical relation of the human with self and world. Consequently, the key mystical concepts in his works—such as the perfect human, love, or asceticism—are not strictly ontological formulations but pedagogical and purificatory patterns, which are later interpreted ontologically in theoretical mysticism, while in Sanāʾī they retain an ethical orientation (12). This epistemic distance means that Sanāʾī is not the originator of theoretical mysticism,

but the condition of its possibility; for he deepens the realm of experience to such an extent that theoretical mysticism can, on its basis, move toward ontological exposition.

The Historical–Intellectual Background of al-Andalus and the Formation of Ibn ʿArabī's Mysticism

Twelfth-century al-Andalus, as a multicultural and multilingual locus within the Islamic world, provided a distinctive space for the emergence of theoretical mysticism. In this land, the coexistence of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, along with the flourishing of philosophy, theology, and the rational sciences, made possible the development of a systematic and universal approach to mysticism. Ibn ʿArabī arose within precisely this historical and intellectual context—a thinker who, by integrating Sufi experience with philosophical analysis, established a system built around key concepts such as the unity of being (waḥdat al-wujūd), the perfect human, and the imaginal realm. Examining this background is not only essential for understanding the growth and characteristics of Andalusian mysticism, but also makes it possible to undertake a comparative analysis of Ibn ʿArabī's thought and the Khorasani mysticism of Sanāʾī.

The Political–Civilizational Condition of al-Andalus in the 12th Century

The political–civilizational condition of 12th-century al-Andalus can be analyzed as a complex matrix in which the rivalry between the Almoravids and the Almohads, the multicultural composition of the population, and the flourishing of philosophy and the rational sciences simultaneously influenced the emergence of theoretical mysticism. The Almoravids and the Almohads, each with different political and religious orientations, ruled over the territories of al-Andalus and the Maghreb, and the competition between these two powers not only generated social tensions but also created opportunities for cultural exchange. These rivalries turned the intellectual environment of al-Andalus—especially in urban centers—into a field of interaction among various traditions, where not only Islam but also Christian and Jewish heritages participated in epistemic exchange (17).

The multicultural character of al-Andalus, particularly in cities such as Córdoba and Seville, created conditions in which philosophy, logic, and the rational sciences could develop alongside mysticism and theology. Philosophers such as Ibn Rushd and Ibn Ṭufayl, by linking rational experience with philosophical theories, exemplified this potential—a potential that later resonated within Ibn ʿArabī's epistemic system and helped prepare the ground for the synthesis of mystical experience and philosophical reflection (26). This intellectual flourishing did not merely mean the growth of theoretical sciences; it also generated a space in which mysticism could move beyond the level of individual experience and be redefined in a systematic and universal form.

Within this civilizational context, Ibn ʿArabī's mysticism was the product of an active interaction among cultural diversity, political rivalry, and philosophical richness. He succeeded in explaining the key concepts of theoretical mysticism—such as the unity of being and the perfect human—within a coherent framework that was both shaped by the Islamic tradition and open to receiving and integrating teachings drawn from multiple cultures (10). Thus, the political and civilizational condition of al-Andalus not only provided the ground for Ibn ʿArabī's emergence, but also determined the form and orientation of his epistemic system, elevating Andalusian theoretical mysticism from a purely spiritual experience to a philosophical and systematic one. In his works—especially *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah*—Ibn ʿArabī articulates a conception of "the unity of being" where he states that one must "accept multiplicity in the realm of fixity, while separating it from existence, and affirm unity in existence, while keeping it distinct from fixity."

Sufi Currents in the Islamic West

The Sufi currents in the Islamic West in the 12th century developed with specific characteristics that were rooted both in the ascetic tradition and in the influence of esoteric tendencies and the theoretical mysticism of the East. Andalusian ascetic Sufism, with its emphasis on spiritual discipline, intimacy with God, and avoidance of worldly attachments, was the continuation of a tradition already widespread in Khorasan and other eastern regions; yet the multicultural and rationalist conditions of al-Andalus pushed it toward flexibility and the acceptance of broader epistemic dimensions. In this context, individual experience and mystical states, expressed through symbolic and metaphorical language, gained new dimensions and made possible a redefinition of the relationship between the human being, God, and the world (27).

In addition, esoteric currents—transmitted through the influence of Eastern Islamic teachings and interaction with Iranian–Islamic traditions—played a significant role in shaping the theoretical formulations of Andalusian mysticism. Through Sufi networks, theological debates, and mystical texts, these tendencies enabled a linkage between intuitive experience and philosophical analysis and prepared the ground for the emergence of coherent epistemic systems (6).

Possible connections between al-Andalus and the Eastern Islamic lands—especially via trade routes, pilgrimage journeys, and scholarly exchange—facilitated the transmission of mystical concepts, technical terms, and experiences. These interactions were not limited to the direct transfer of doctrines; they also brought the cultural and intellectual conditions of al-Andalus into greater alignment with Eastern models and helped to shape a flexible and universal theoretical mysticism. Ibn ʿArabī, in particular, was the product of this synthesis: he was able to bring together Andalusian ascetic elements, Eastern esoteric teachings, and philosophical doctrines within a coherent and systematic framework, thereby raising mystical experience from the individual level to the theoretical (13). In this way, the Sufi currents of the Islamic West represented a combination of local asceticism, Eastern esoteric influences, and broad cultural interactions that made possible the emergence of a theoretical and philosophical mysticism such as that of Ibn ʿArabī, without severing its roots in traditional practice and individual ascetic experience.

Ibn ʿArabī: Life and Intellectual Transformations

The intellectual transformations of Ibn ʿArabī cannot be separated from his spiritual journey in al-Andalus and the Maghreb, where life in a multicultural and multilingual environment provided a rich foundation for the formation of his early mystical views. His initial path of spiritual discipline, grounded in personal experience and ascetic practices, was reinforced by observing the interpenetration of Islamic, Christian, and Jewish traditions and enabled him to elevate mystical experience from a purely ethical and ascetic framework to a level of theoretical reflection (5). At this stage, by focusing on inner intuition and direct relation with God, Ibn ʿArabī laid the epistemic foundations that would later be reflected in his theoretical works. His intellectual transformations thus have their roots in his early mystical experience within the Andalusian milieu. He himself notes in *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah* that unveiling (mukāshafa) and inner inspiration constitute the fundamental source of his knowledge, rather than mere rational speculation. He also relates that in the year 580 AH he entered the mystical path and first encountered Abū Jaʿfar Aḥmad ʿArīnī "on the path of God." Moreover, he describes love of the Real as his religion and faith: "I profess this

love… for love is my religion and my faith," and explains that love cannot be defined with simple words and that whoever has not experienced it does not know its reality—"a drink that does not quench anyone."

Ibn ʿArabī's migration to the Eastern Islamic lands—especially the scholarly centers of Baghdad, Aleppo, and Damascus—played a crucial role in expanding his intellectual horizon. This movement was not merely geographical but also cultural and epistemic, for access to philosophical, theological, and mystical texts from the Eastern Islamic world enabled him to interact with diverse traditions. His engagement with scholarly and Sufi circles, his study of earlier works, and his intellectual exchanges with scholars and mystics allowed him to link his initial spiritual path with a coherent theoretical framework and to elevate individual experience to the level of a philosophical and mystical system (13).

The writing of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah* and *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* is the most salient expression of this intellectual transformation. In these works, Ibn ʿArabī combines his intuitive and spiritual experience with ontological analysis and the explanation of the hierarchy of being, thereby providing a philosophical framework for mystical concepts. By presenting the doctrine of the unity of being and analyzing the role of the perfect human, he seeks to explain the relationship between the world, the human being, and the Absolute Truth in a systematic way, such that the mystical path simultaneously acquires ethical, ontological, and epistemic dimensions (3). In Ibn ʿArabī's works—especially *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* and *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah*—his intellectual development is clearly reflected: he integrates his intuitive experiences with systematic ontological analysis. For example, in *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* he states that "the perfect human is the manifestation of the divine names… and for this reason the world is called the great human."

Thus, Ibn ʿArabī's life and intellectual transformations exemplify the linkage between practical Sufi experience, engagement with diverse cultural–intellectual milieus, and the theoretical re-presentation of that experience in the form of classical mystical works. This process transformed him from an ascetic Sufi into a global thinker and the leading theorist of the unity of being and made possible a comparative study between his mysticism and the Khorasani mysticism of Sanāʾī.

Key Concepts in Ibn ʿArabī's Thought

The key concepts in Ibn ʿArabī's thought—especially the unity of being, the perfect human, the imaginal realm, and divine love—provide a coherent structure for understanding the relationship between the human being, God, and the world, and they elevate mystical experience from an individual level to an ontological one. In this epistemic system, the unity of being is not merely a theological proposition, but a framework that regards all phenomena of the world as manifestations of the Absolute Truth and analyzes the relationship between creatures and the Creator within an integrated network. In the chapter on the wisdom of oneness (Fuṣṣ Ḥikmat Aḥadiyya, the Fuṣṣ of Hūd), Ibn ʿArabī says: "There is nothing in existence except God" (*fa-laysa fī l-wujūd illā Allāh*), that is, "In being, there exists none but God" (*Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, ed. ʿAfīfī, p. 95) (4). Likewise, in the *Futūḥāt* he writes: "The whole world is imagination within imagination" (*fa-l-ʿālam kulluhu khayāl fī khayāl*) (*al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah*, vol. 2, chapter 178) (28). This concept enables theoretical mysticism to understand the apparent contradictions of the world, including the problem of evil, as relative manifestations of the one Truth and to bring intuitive experience into alignment with philosophical analysis (11).

The perfect human in Ibn ʿArabī's thought is the axis of the embodiment of the unity of being and the mediator between the material world and the Absolute Reality. He is not merely a moral being but the complete manifestation of the levels of existence, possessing the capacity to reflect the divine attributes and to harmonize with the currents

of being. In this regard, he writes: "The perfect human is the all-comprehensive configuration" (*fa-l-insān al-kāmil huwa al-nashaʾa al-jāmiʿa*), that is, the perfect human is the being that gathers all levels of existence (*Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, the Fuṣṣ of Adam, p. 49) (4). The perfect human offers a model for practical and epistemic spiritual wayfaring, according to which mystical experience leads both to knowledge of the structure of reality and to the realization of human perfection (7). The imaginal realm, with its capacity to mediate between the sensible world and the world of pure intelligibles, makes possible the visualization and symbolic understanding of mystical concepts. In this regard, Ibn ʿArabī states in the *Futūḥāt*: "For this reason we have named that world the imaginal world" (*wa-li-hādhā sammaynā dhālika al-ʿālam bi-l-ʿālam al-mutakhayyal / al-mithāl*) (*al-Futūḥāt*, vol. 2, chapter 367) (28). He employs this level as an instrument for explaining the degrees of existence, the nature of intuitive experience, and the path toward realization of the perfect human, thus raising mysticism beyond the limits of sensory cognition (29).

Divine love, within this system, is the driving force that both renders the unity of being intelligible and guides the perfect human in his movement toward perfection. Love, together with reason and intuition, shapes mystical experience and makes possible the coexistence of rational and intuitive dimensions along the path of human perfection (7). Taken together, these four concepts in Ibn ʿArabī's thought are not separate elements, but parts of an integrated philosophical–mystical system that interweaves mystical experience, ontological analysis, and ethical realization, and that also makes possible a comparative understanding with the Khorasani tradition of Sanāʾī.

Ibn ʿArabī as a Universal Figure of Mysticism

Ibn ʿArabī can be regarded as a universal figure in Islamic mysticism because he succeeded in integrating the intellectual heritage of the Eastern Islamic lands with the mystical experiences of the Islamic West into a single coherent system. The ascetic experience of al-Andalus, his interaction with Christian and Jewish cultures, and his access to philosophical and theological texts from the East enabled him to transform scattered elements from diverse traditions into a unified theoretical framework. This synthesis was not a passive reception of tradition, but an active re-creation of concepts and the formation of a system in which mystical experience, philosophical analysis, and ontology are interwoven (10). As Ibn ʿArabī himself emphasizes, his knowledge arises from the conjunction of reason, transmitted revelation, and unveiling: "Knowledge is of three kinds: reason, transmission, and unveiling; and the matter is not complete without the union of all three" (*al-ʿilm thalātha: ʿaql wa-naql wa-kashf; wa-lā yatimmu l-amr illā bi-ijtimaʿihā*) (*al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah*) (28). In *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* he calls the perfect human "the one who gathers together the Real and creation" (*al-jāmiʿ li-l-ḥaqq wa-l-khalq*), and in *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* he declares: "My heart has become capable of every form… love is my religion and my faith," indicating that his thought is the product of a creative synthesis of mystical experience, cultural cosmopolitanism, and philosophical reflection (4).

The fundamental difference between Ibn ʿArabī and Sanāʾī becomes evident at the level of mystical methodology. Sanāʾī primarily emphasizes ethical and individual intuitive experience and organizes concepts such as love, asceticism, and the perfect human within a practical and pedagogical framework; his goal is therefore the guidance of the human being along the path of purification and moral perfection (24). Ibn ʿArabī, by contrast, elevates mystical experience to the level of an ontological system and seeks to analyze the relationship between the human being, the totality of existence, and the Absolute Truth. Within this framework, intuition, reason, and mystical symbols are instruments for theoretical formulation, not merely pathways for moral reform (30).

Moreover, Ibn ʿArabī's universality is reflected in his view of the perfect human and the unity of being. The perfect human, as the mediator between the material world and the Absolute, makes possible the realization of the unity of

being in human experience, so that mystical experience transcends individual and regional boundaries and acquires a global dimension. This approach—unlike the Khorasani tradition, which focuses more on local conditions and ethical experiences—embraces ontological and philosophical dimensions and generates a universal form of knowledge capable of supporting comparative studies with other mystical and even philosophical traditions (10). Thus, Ibn ʿArabī is a figure who, through the integration of Eastern and Western heritages and the elevation of mystical methodology to an ontological system, has carried Islamic mysticism beyond regional and purely ethical experience and transformed it into a global and coherent structure.

Civilizational Links and Shared Elements between the Eastern and Western Islamic Worlds in the 12th Century

The civilizational links and shared elements between the Eastern and Western Islamic worlds in the 12th century reflect broad intellectual and mystical currents that operated beyond geographical borders and enabled the emergence of a shared mystical discourse. Scholarly and cultural exchanges during this period—especially through pilgrimage routes and the journeys of scholars—played a foundational role in creating networks of connection between Khorasan, Baghdad, Damascus, and al-Andalus. These travels, in addition to transmitting juridical, ḥadīth, and theological knowledge, also made possible the exchange of mystical experiences and practical Sufi teachings. Mystical texts, spiritual poetry, and ethical treatises were transmitted from one region to another, bringing local traditions into alignment with broader teachings and preparing the ground for the development of mystical thought in systematic form (25). These exchanges also ensured that scholarly and Sufi circles—even across great geographical distances—remained in interaction with each other and fostered the emergence of a shared spiritual and intellectual space.

The shared institutions of ḥadīth, jurisprudence, and the religious sciences likewise played, beyond their educational role, a central part in transmitting spiritual experience and ethical concepts. In cities such as Baghdad, Samarqand, and Fez, these schools served not only as sites for teaching religious sciences but also as arenas for dialogue and exchange between scholars and Sufis. Such interactions gradually led to a harmonization and convergence of the core mystical teachings throughout the Islamic world and contributed to the emergence of coherent currents such as the mysticism of Sanāʾī in the East and the theoretical mysticism of Ibn ʿArabī in the West (5). The transmission of key concepts such as asceticism, love, knowledge, and spiritual wayfaring (*sulūk*) through these networks made possible the formation of an interregional mystical discourse and transformed local traditions into components of a broader civilizational whole.

Within this context, Sufism functioned as an intercontinental discourse, and Sufi networks played a central role in connecting the Eastern and Western Islamic worlds. Sufi circles, including urban centers and travel routes, not only facilitated the transmission of teachings but also fostered intellectual consonance and shared perspectives among Sufis in different regions. These networks, while retaining flexibility and adapting teachings to local conditions, supported the diffusion of shared concepts between East and West, so that the doctrines of Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī, despite geographical and historical distance, reveal striking similarities in the principles and aims of mystical experience (19). These similarities include an emphasis on spiritual discipline and individual wayfaring, divine love, concern for human perfection, and the role of intuition in understanding reality, and they show that mystical currents, even in distinct cultural settings, possess the capacity to generate a common spiritual language.

Elements of intellectual unity also played a decisive role in these interactions. The human-centered character of Islamic mysticism, particularly the concept of the perfect human, raised the understanding of mystical experience to a more universal level and overshadowed regional boundaries. Emphasis on spiritual and intuitive experience, in contrast to official theology and juridical systems, led to the recognition of individual wayfaring and intuitive unveiling as the core axis of mysticism and to a unified analysis of the human journey toward spiritual perfection (25). Spiritual poetry and prose—whether in Sanāʾī's *Dīwān* or in Ibn ʿArabī's *Futūḥāt* and *Fuṣūṣ*—served as instruments for transmitting these shared experiences and concepts, and the symbolic and linguistic power of these texts raised mystical experience to a social and cultural level as well (14).

These shared elements, including core notions such as asceticism, love, knowledge, and the experience of spiritual wayfaring, indicate the presence of common civilizational and spiritual foundations between the Eastern and Western Islamic worlds. They not only made possible the emergence of independent, regionally rooted mystical currents, but also prepared the ground for the development of philosophical and mystical theories and systems. Although the teachings of Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī were formed within different cultural and historical contexts, they preserve at their core the same anthropocentric orientation, focus on spiritual experience, and use of symbolic poetry and prose (24). Ultimately, it can be said that the civilizational links and shared elements between the Eastern and Western Islamic worlds in the 12th century, beyond mere cultural and scholarly interaction, made possible the formation of a shared mystical discourse. These interactions transformed local traditions into parts of a larger spiritual and intellectual whole and prepared the way for the development of currents such as the mysticism of Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī. Such a milieu not only enabled the transmission of mystical concepts, experiences, and methods, but also carried Islamic mysticism beyond the level of individual and regional experience and contributed to the emergence of a transnational and universal spiritual–intellectual tradition capable of presenting diverse teachings and experiences within a coherent and harmonious framework and of consolidating the linkage between the Eastern and Western Islamic worlds.

A Comparative Study of the Thought of Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī

A comparative study of the thought of Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī offers an opportunity to rediscover the connections and fundamental distinctions between two major mystical traditions in the medieval Islamic world. Sanāʾī represents the current of practical and ethical mysticism in Khorasan, expressing the experience of asceticism, love, and the ethical perfect human in the form of didactic poetry, whereas Ibn ʿArabī embodies the theoretical and ontological mysticism of the Islamic West, presenting concepts such as the unity of being, the perfect human, and the imaginal realm within a philosophical and systematic framework. Such a comparative examination makes it possible to analyze the role of historical, cultural, and civilizational contexts in shaping mystical experience and in the representation of its key concepts, and to show whether the similarities and differences arise more from shared civilizational foundations or from local and methodological contexts. In this regard, the centrality of the human being, spiritual experience, and the use of poetic and symbolic language are taken as points of connection and criteria of comparison between the two traditions, and the comparative study can clarify how two mystical paths in the Eastern and Western Islamic worlds, despite geographical and cultural distances, respond to shared epistemic and ethical concerns.

The Comparative Method

The comparative method for analyzing the thought of Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī rests on examining the fundamental structures of mysticism across four key indices: anthropology, ontology, epistemology, and mystical language. In mystical anthropology, Sanāʾī emphasizes the ethical and perfected human who attains completion through purification of the self, asceticism, and divine love, whereas Ibn ʿArabī views the perfect human as the mediator between the sensible world and the Absolute Reality, and analyzes the human levels of being in relation to the totality of existence. This difference reflects distinct methodologies in understanding the place of the human being within the cosmic order and enables a comparative analysis between practical and theoretical mystical experience (13).

In the ontological index, Sanāʾī views the world as a field for moral education and for the expansion of human concepts, whereas Ibn ʿArabī regards the world as a manifestation of the unity of being and of the hierarchy of creatures, a view that elevates mystical experience from the individual level to the level of the macro-structure of being. This broad ontological perspective allows a comparative analysis of levels of existence, the role of the human being, and the relationship between creatures and the Creator, and shows that each tradition—despite their shared spiritual aims—offers a different framework for understanding reality (6).

Epistemology returns to the centrality of spiritual experience and intuition. Sanāʾī organizes mystical experience in the form of practical wayfaring and moral instruction, whereas Ibn ʿArabī employs reason and intuition as instruments for analyzing the structure of existence and understanding the unity of being. This difference in modes of knowing is a key index for assessing the convergence or divergence between the Eastern and Western Islamic mystical traditions (27).

Mystical language, the fourth index, provides the means to convey complex mystical concepts. Sanāʾī uses rhymed poetry to express ethical and mystical ideas in a human and affective language, while Ibn ʿArabī employs philosophical and symbolic prose to articulate intricate ontological and theoretical mystical concepts. A comparative analysis of these indices clarifies the connections and distinctions between the two mystical traditions and makes it possible to identify shared civilizational and cultural elements (13).

Conceptual-Level Comparison

Conceptual comparison between the thought of Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī reveals the fundamental connections and distinctions between the Eastern and Western Islamic mystical traditions. One of the main axes of this comparison is the concept of *love*. Sanāʾī defines love in an ethical and ascetic framework and regards it as an instrument for spiritual training and as a means of self-purification, such that spiritual wayfaring and moral conduct stand in direct relation to the intensity and purity of love (24). By contrast, Ibn ʿArabī presents love as the very principle of being and the foundation of the unity of being, maintaining that all phenomena of the world are manifestations of divine love which binds existence together and that the perfect human is the center of this unity (3).

The outcome of this comparison shows that although the language of love is present in both traditions, the philosophical difference between them in terms of the nature and scope of love is striking: Sanāʾī focuses more on its ethical and pedagogical dimension, while Ibn ʿArabī considers it at the macro-level of being and ontology (13).

In the domain of the perfect human, Sanāʾī sees the human being as a devout, ethical wayfarer who attains perfection through adherence to moral virtues and spiritual disciplines (1). Ibn ʿArabī, however, presents the perfect

human as the manifestation of the divine names and as the central axis of the cosmic order, around whom all beings revolve and whose knowledge makes understanding the whole of existence possible (3). This divergence of approach points to two different routes in mystical anthropology: one ethical-practical, the other theoretical-ontological.

Mystical language and expression constitute another point of distinction. Sanāʾī uses poetic, critical, and pedagogical language to convey ethical and spiritual concepts to the audience, whereas Ibn ʿArabī employs philosophical, hermeneutical, and complex language in order to explain the system of the unity of being and ontological concepts in theoretical mysticism (24). This difference reflects the influence of Khorasan's literary power in producing poetic mystical texts and the impact of Andalusian philosophy and rational sciences in shaping a theoretical language.

The relationship between mysticism and political power also offers an instructive comparison. Sanāʾī turns to criticizing power and distancing himself from the court, and his wayfaring is consistently accompanied by ethical and spiritual independence, whereas Ibn ʿArabī adopts a holistic, non-political approach that focuses more on analyzing being and spiritual experience than on direct political critique (13). This difference reflects the distinct political and cultural structures of the two regions, each creating specific opportunities and constraints for mystical activity.

On the ontological level, Sanāʾī links his ethical mysticism to theological tendencies and practical Sufism, such that the world and the human being provide a field for the realization of moral virtues and spiritual training (1). Ibn ʿArabī, by contrast, presents a complex ontological system based on the unity of being, in which all phenomena of the world are seen as part of a continuous hierarchy of existence (3). These differences arise largely from the intellectual and philosophical contexts of each region: Khorasan, with its emphasis on theology and practical Sufism, and al-Andalus, centered on philosophy and the rational sciences, each shaped its own mystical tradition. Overall, conceptual comparison shows that while there are shared linguistic and thematic elements between Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī, their philosophical, anthropological, and ontological differences are products of distinct cultural and scholarly contexts. This comparison enables a better understanding of the intellectual structures and methodologies of each mystical tradition and highlights the importance of historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts in shaping mystical experiences.

Historical-Level Comparison

Historical comparison between Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī clarifies the role each played in the development of Islamic mysticism and makes it possible to analyze clearly the structural and temporal differences between the two mystical traditions. In Khorasan, at the outset of major intellectual and cultural transformations, Sanāʾī emerges as the initiator of mystical poetry; by drawing on the capacities of rhymed Persian verse, he articulates practical and ethical mystical experience in poetic form and provides the groundwork for the emergence of a literary Sufi tradition (2). His presence in the early phase of Khorasan's intellectual transformations makes it possible to explore asceticism, ethics, and self-purification within the cultural and religious context of his time and elevates mystical experience from a purely practical dimension to social and literary levels.

Ibn ʿArabī, however, at the concluding stage of al-Andalus's golden age, follows a different path by focusing on systematization and theorization of mysticism. Through the composition of theoretical works such as *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah* and *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, he raises mysticism from the level of individual experience to that of philosophical

and ontological discourse and presents concepts such as the unity of being, the perfect human, and the imaginal realm as the foundations of the theoretical structure of mysticism (7). His position at the end of this period marks the completion of a historical phase that moves from practical mystical experience to theoretical and ontological mysticism.

The difference in historical moment is another crucial factor in comparative analysis. Sanāʾī, at the beginning of Khorasan's intellectual transformations and within cultural and political contexts shaped by the Nizamiya schools, kalām, and asceticism, contributes to the formation of practical mysticism and ethical poetry. Ibn ʿArabī, conversely, at the end of al-Andalus's golden age and within multicultural and philosophical conditions, has the opportunity to present mystical experience within a theoretical and comprehensive ontological framework (30). This temporal difference leads Sanāʾī to play the role of initiator and founder of a practical and literary mystical tradition, while Ibn ʿArabī assumes the role of its completer and systematizer.

In historical analysis, one can conclude that both figures, in their respective positions, responded to the spiritual and intellectual needs of their own eras: Sanāʾī represents mystical experience within the context of ethics and practical human life, while Ibn ʿArabī organizes mystical experience in the form of philosophical and ontological systems. This historical comparison shows that the development of Islamic mysticism has taken place not only through the expansion of concepts, but also through changes in cultural, political, and scholarly contexts, and it underscores the importance of historical circumstance in shaping mystical experiences.

A Comparative Study of the Thought of Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī

The comparative study of the thought of Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī provides an opportunity to recognize the connections and fundamental distinctions between two major mystical traditions in the medieval Islamic world. Sanāʾī represents the current of practical and ethical mysticism in Khorasan, expressing the experience of asceticism, love, and the ethical perfect human in the form of didactic verse, whereas Ibn ʿArabī stands as the emblem of theoretical and ontological mysticism in the Islamic West, presenting concepts such as the unity of being, the perfect human, and the imaginal realm within a philosophical and systematic framework. This comparative inquiry makes it possible to analyze the role of historical, cultural, and civilizational contexts in shaping mystical experience and in representing its key concepts, and to show whether similarities and differences arise primarily from shared civilizational foundations or from local and methodological contexts. In this regard, the centrality of the human being, spiritual experience, and the use of poetic and symbolic language are treated as points of connection and as criteria of comparison between the two traditions, and the comparative study can clarify how two mystical paths in the Eastern and Western Islamic worlds, despite geographical and cultural distance, respond to common epistemic and ethical concerns.

The Comparative Method

The comparative method for analyzing the thought of Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī rests on examining the fundamental mystical structures across four key indices: anthropology, ontology, epistemology, and mystical language. In mystical anthropology, Sanāʾī emphasizes the ethical and perfected human who attains completion through self-purification, asceticism, and divine love, whereas Ibn ʿArabī views the perfect human as a mediator between the sensible world and the Absolute Reality and analyzes the human being's levels of existence in relation to the totality

of being. This difference reflects distinct methodologies in understanding the place of the human being within the cosmic order and enables a comparative analysis between practical and theoretical mystical experience (31).

In the ontological index, Sanāʾī understands the world as a field for moral instruction and for the expansion of human concepts, whereas Ibn ʿArabī regards the world as a manifestation of the unity of being and of a hierarchy of creatures that elevates mystical experience from the individual level to the level of the macro-structure of existence. This broad ontological outlook allows a comparative analysis of the levels of being, the role of the human being, and the relationship between creatures and the Creator, and shows that each tradition—despite shared spiritual aims—offers a different framework for understanding reality (6).

Epistemology returns to the centrality of spiritual experience and intuition. Sanāʾī organizes mystical experience in the form of practical wayfaring and ethical instruction, whereas Ibn ʿArabī employs reason and intuition as instruments for analyzing the structure of being and understanding the unity of existence. This divergence in modes of knowing is a key index for assessing the convergence or divergence between Eastern and Western Islamic mystical traditions (27).

Mystical language, the fourth index, provides the means to convey complex mystical concepts. Sanāʾī uses rhymed poetry to express ethical and mystical ideas in a human and affective language, whereas Ibn ʿArabī employs philosophical and symbolic prose to articulate intricate ontological and theoretical mystical concepts. A comparative analysis of these indices clarifies the connections and distinctions between the two mystical traditions and makes it possible to identify shared civilizational and cultural elements (31).

Conceptual-Level Comparison

Conceptual comparison between the thought of Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī reveals the fundamental links and distinctions between the Eastern and Western Islamic mystical traditions. One of the main axes of this comparison is the concept of *love*. Sanāʾī defines love within an ethical and ascetic framework and regards it as an instrument of spiritual training and as a means of self-purification, such that spiritual wayfaring and moral conduct stand in direct relation to the intensity and purity of love (24). By contrast, Ibn ʿArabī presents love as the very principle of being and the foundation of the unity of existence, holding that all phenomena of the world are manifestations of divine love that binds being together, and that the perfect human is the center of this unity (3).

The result of this comparison shows that although the language of love is present in both traditions, the philosophical difference in the nature and scope of love is striking: Sanāʾī focuses more on its ethical and pedagogical dimension, while Ibn ʿArabī considers it at the macro-level of being and ontology (13).

With respect to the perfect human, Sanāʾī conceives the human being as a devout, ethical wayfarer who reaches perfection through observance of moral virtues and spiritual disciplines (1). Ibn ʿArabī, however, presents the perfect human as the manifestation of the divine names and as the central axis of the cosmic order, around whom all beings revolve and whose knowledge makes possible understanding of the whole of existence (3). This difference of approach reveals two distinct routes in mystical anthropology: one ethical–practical, the other theoretical–ontological.

Mystical language and expression constitute another point of distinction. Sanāʾī uses poetic, critical, and pedagogical language to convey ethical and spiritual concepts to his audience, whereas Ibn ʿArabī employs philosophical, hermeneutical, and complex language to explain the system of the unity of being and ontological concepts in theoretical mysticism (24). This difference reflects the impact of Khorasan's literary power in producing

poetic mystical texts and the influence of Andalusian philosophy and rational sciences in shaping a theoretical language.

The relationship between mysticism and political power also offers an instructive comparison. Sanāʾī turns to criticizing worldly power and distancing himself from the court, and his wayfaring is consistently accompanied by ethical and spiritual independence, whereas Ibn ʿArabī adopts a holistic and non-political approach that focuses more on analyzing being and spiritual experience than on direct political critique (13). This difference reflects the distinct political and cultural structures of the two regions, each creating specific opportunities and constraints for mystical activity.

On the ontological level, Sanāʾī links his ethical mysticism to theological tendencies and practical Sufism, such that the world and the human being provide a field for the realization of moral virtues and spiritual training (1). Ibn ʿArabī, by contrast, presents a complex ontological system based on the unity of being, in which all phenomena of the world are seen as part of a continuous hierarchy of existence (3). These differences arise largely from the intellectual and philosophical contexts of each region: Khorasan, with its emphasis on kalām and practical Sufism, and al-Andalus, centered on philosophy and the rational sciences, each shaped its own mystical tradition. Overall, conceptual comparison shows that, while there are shared linguistic and thematic elements between Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī, their philosophical, anthropological, and ontological differences are products of distinct cultural and scholarly contexts. This comparison enables a better understanding of the intellectual structures and methodologies of each mystical tradition and highlights the importance of historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts in shaping mystical experience.

Historical-Level Comparison

Historical comparison between Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī clarifies the role each played in the development of Islamic mysticism and makes it possible to analyze clearly the structural and temporal differences between the two mystical traditions. In Khorasan, at the beginning of major intellectual and cultural transformations, Sanāʾī emerges as the initiator of mystical poetry; by drawing on the capacities of rhymed Persian verse, he articulates practical and ethical mystical experience in poetic form and provides the groundwork for the emergence of a literary Sufi tradition (2). His presence in the early phase of Khorasan's intellectual transformations made it possible to explore asceticism, ethics, and self-purification within the cultural and religious context of his time and elevated mystical experience from a purely practical dimension to social and literary levels.

Ibn ʿArabī, however, at the concluding stage of al-Andalus's golden age, follows a different path by focusing on the systematization and theorization of mysticism. Through the composition of theoretical works such as *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah* and *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, he raises mysticism from the level of individual experience to that of philosophical and ontological discourse and presents concepts such as the unity of being, the perfect human, and the imaginal realm as the foundations of the theoretical structure of mysticism (7). His position at the end of this period marks the completion of a historical phase that moves from practical mystical experience to theoretical and ontological mysticism.

The difference in historical moment is another crucial factor in comparative analysis. Sanāʾī, at the beginning of Khorasan's intellectual transformations and within cultural and political contexts shaped by the Nizamiya schools, kalām, and asceticism, contributes to the formation of practical mysticism and ethical poetry, whereas Ibn ʿArabī, at the end of al-Andalus's golden age and within multicultural and philosophical conditions, has the opportunity to

present mystical experience within a theoretical and comprehensive ontological framework (30). This temporal difference leads Sanāʾī to play the role of initiator and founder of a practical and literary mystical tradition, while Ibn ʿArabī assumes the role of its completer and systematizer.

In historical analysis, one can conclude that both figures, in their respective positions, responded to the spiritual and intellectual needs of their own eras: Sanāʾī represents mystical experience within the context of ethics and practical human life, whereas Ibn ʿArabī organizes mystical experience in the form of philosophical and ontological systems. This historical comparison shows that the development of Islamic mysticism has taken place not only through the expansion of concepts, but also through changes in cultural, political, and scholarly contexts, and it underscores the importance of historical circumstances in shaping mystical experience.

Points of Convergence

The points of convergence between the thought of Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī reflect the fundamental tendencies of Islamic mysticism, which, despite temporal and geographical differences, reveal conceptual unity and shared values. Both thinkers place deep emphasis on ethics and the purification of the self and regard mystical wayfaring as incomplete if it is not linked to moral reform. Sanāʾī, through poetic and allegorical language, presents ethical virtues such as justice, courage, patience, and humility within the context of divine love (9), while Ibn ʿArabī sees the perfect human as a being who, through purification and refinement of the self, becomes the manifestation of the divine names and places ethics at the center of mystical experience in relation to being (32). This shared emphasis shows that self-purification and moral reform formed the common basis of mystical experience in the Eastern and Western Islamic worlds.

A spiritual outlook on the world is another major point of convergence; both traditions regard existence as a manifestation of the Absolute Truth and as an arena for the spiritual growth of the human being. Sanāʾī portrays the world as a stage for practicing asceticism and ethical love (33), while Ibn ʿArabī views the world as a harmonious system in which every phenomenon is a sign of the unity of being and a manifestation of divine love. In both cases, spiritual experience is understood as transcending worldly appearances and material concerns, and the human being is treated as a creature connected to the totality of existence.

Critique of worldliness is another salient point of similarity. Sanāʾī, by distancing himself from the court and criticizing luxury and material greed, calls the human being to focus on ethical and spiritual wayfaring, while Ibn ʿArabī, by emphasizing the unity of being and the ultimate telos of existence, considers attachment to the world to be limited and subsidiary to the spiritual path (9).

The use of allegorical and metaphorical language is another shared feature. Sanāʾī employs rhymed verse and ethical metaphors to teach mysticism, while Ibn ʿArabī uses philosophical and symbolic language to articulate complex ontological and spiritual concepts (32). This similarity in expressive tools facilitates the translation of abstract concepts into lived mystical experience and shows that, despite stylistic differences, both traditions pursue the same spiritual and pedagogical aims. Overall, these commonalities show that mystical experience in the Eastern and Western Islamic worlds displays deep convergence in ethical, spiritual, and pedagogical aims, and that differences appear more clearly in modes of expression and philosophical framework.

Points of Divergence

The fundamental differences between the thought of Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī reflect the geographical, historical, and intellectual divergences of their respective mystical traditions. At the level of worldview, Sanāʾī, with an ethical and ascetic outlook, sees the world as a stage for training the soul and purifying the self, and his main concern is focused on reforming behavior and cultivating moral virtues (20). By contrast, Ibn ʿArabī regards the world as an ontological system and as a manifestation of the unity of being, in which every phenomenon is a symbol of the manifestation of the divine names, and his perspective is philosophical and theoretical (11).

The method of mystical knowledge also differs fundamentally. Sanāʾī, through ethical wayfaring and asceticism, pursues mystical experience in a practical and pedagogical form and emphasizes direct observation and experience, whereas Ibn ʿArabī adopts a philosophical–hermeneutical and systematic method and organizes mystical concepts in the form of ontological and theological theories (10). The role of reason also differs in these two traditions. Sanāʾī sees reason as serving ethics and distinguishing between good and evil and treats it as an instrument of practical wayfaring, whereas Ibn ʿArabī regards reason as a component of a broader epistemic system that is necessary for grasping the realities of being and understanding the unity of existence (11). The place of human will in Sanāʾī's thought is defined by an emphasis on choice and ethical decision-making in the path of self-purification, whereas in Ibn ʿArabī's thought human will, though important, is analyzed within the broader framework of the cosmic order and the manifestation of the divine names (15).

The degree of influence from philosophy and kalām also produces a significant difference. Sanāʾī, under the influence of Ashʿarite theology and the ethical tradition of Khorasan, presents mystical experience in a practical and literary form, while Ibn ʿArabī, drawing extensively on Peripatetic philosophy, Illuminationist thought, and Greek wisdom, elevates mysticism to a theoretical and macro-ontological level (10). Taken together, these differences indicate two distinct routes of Islamic mystical experience: Sanāʾī represents the ethical, practical, and pedagogical route, and Ibn ʿArabī represents the philosophical, theoretical, and ontological route, even though both ultimately aim at human transcendence and connection with absolute realities.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the thought of Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī shows that the question of the extent of Ibn ʿArabī's direct indebtedness to Sanāʾī faces serious limitations from a historical perspective. Given the temporal and geographical distance between the two mystics, and the absence of documented evidence indicating a meeting or correspondence between them, direct and conscious influence cannot be definitively affirmed. Sanāʾī, in Khorasan at the beginning of the 12th century, laid the foundations of mystical poetry by focusing on mystical ethics, training of the self, and asceticism, whereas Ibn ʿArabī, in al-Andalus and later in the Eastern Islamic lands at the end of the same century, concentrated on developing the ontological system of mysticism and the doctrine of the unity of being. Nevertheless, the possibility of indirect influence through Eastern Sufi networks, the transmission of mystical texts, and the contact of scholars and pilgrims remains examinable; such channels could have created a shared intellectual atmosphere in which conceptual similarities between the Eastern and Western Islamic worlds emerged (25). However, this hypothesis loses strength in light of the limitations of historical sources and the lack of documented evidence of direct contact, and it points less to an individual causal relationship than to the civilizational and cultural continuity between the two regions (5).

The similarities between the thought of Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī are, in effect, the product of the "grand narrative of Islamic mysticism." This narrative, formed across the expanse of Islamic civilization, encompasses shared human values, emphasis on self-purification, divine love, and spiritual experience, and operates beyond spatial and temporal boundaries (25). Within this framework, the Eastern and Western Islamic worlds were linked to one another through scholarly, cultural, and Sufi routes, and a shared intellectual and spiritual foundation was established. This civilizational continuity is not to be understood as direct individual influence, but rather as a context in which similar concepts could emerge in two different geographical regions. This indicates that the Islamic mystical tradition, at its foundational levels, possessed coherence and unity in aims and values.

The final conclusion emphasizes that Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī are two distinct culminations of a shared current: Sanāʾī represents Khorasani mystical ethics, with an emphasis on training the soul, asceticism, and practical wayfaring, while Ibn ʿArabī embodies Andalusian mystical ontology, focusing on the unity of being, the perfect human, and a philosophical–mystical system. The relationship between them cannot be analyzed solely in terms of "individual influence"; rather, it must be understood as "civilizational convergence" and as the result of broad cultural, intellectual, and spiritual interactions between the Eastern and Western Islamic worlds (14). This convergence shows that, despite geographical and historical diversity, the mystical current of Islam has been grounded in shared principles and aims and reflects the unity of spiritual experience across the Islamic world (24). In other words, the conceptual similarities between Sanāʾī and Ibn ʿArabī are better understood as instances of cultural and civilizational convergence than as direct transmission of doctrines. Although their practical, linguistic, and philosophical paths differ, both ultimately lead to human perfection, moral reform, and direct experience of the divine truth. Sanāʾī, with an ethical and poetic language, laid the foundations for practical wayfaring, and Ibn ʿArabī, with a theoretical and philosophical outlook, systematized mystical experience at the macro-ontological level. This combination shows that Islamic mysticism, while preserving its spiritual and philosophical continuity, has been able to follow different yet harmonious routes in two distinct geographical regions and to maintain its civilizational coherence.

Acknowledgments

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

References

1.   Hashemian Bajnourd SA, Khatami A. The Theory of the Hierarchy of Beings in the Thought of Sanai. Recognition. 2022;15(2):293-317.

2.   Saidi H, Feyzi S. Examining the Role of Reason in Recognizing God in the Thoughts of Sanai. Mirror of Knowledge. 2016;16(46):21-41.

3.   Hanifnia E, Afzali A, Ghozbani Y, Mazarei R. Ontology in the School of Ibn Arabi. Islamic Religions Research Journal. 2021;8(15):277-93.

4.   Ibn Arabi MIA. Fusus al-Hikam. 1946.

5.   Jahangiri M. Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi: A Prominent Figure in Islamic Mysticism. Tehran: Tehran University Press; 2018.

6.   Vahidinia A, Gholam Hosseinzadeh GH, Shabiri N, Nikoubakht N. Signs of Iranian-Islamic Mysticism in the Works of Three Andalusian Mystics: Ibn Arabi, Ibn Abbad Rundi, and San Juan de la Cruz. Literary Researches. 2018;15(61):153-84.

7.   Sharifian M, Vafa'i Basir A. Commonalities Between Ibn Arabi and Rumi in the Field of Mystical Thought. Comparative Literature (Literature and Language Journal of the Faculty of Literature and Humanities in Kerman). 2011;2(4):95-123.

8.   Sanai Ghaznavi HFa-D. Hadiqat al-Haqiqah wa Sharī'at al-Tariqah. Tehran: Tehran University Press; 1956.

9.   Afrasiabpour AA. The Mysticism of Sanai. Islamic Mysticism (Religions and Mysticism). 2008;5(18):1-16.

10.   Kassayi Zadeh MS, Alizamani AA, Vakili H. Happiness and Meaning in the School of Ibn Arabi. Comparative Theology. 2012;3(8):43-56.

11.   Foroughi N, Khodai M. The Problem of Evil in the School of Ibn Arabi. New Religious Thought. 2013;9(33):67-80.

12.   Roghar M. The Path of Asceticism in Khorasan Mysticism until the Return to the First Tradition in the 7th Century. Literary Researches. 2022;19(77):125-48.

13.   Roodgar M. Khorasan Mysticism and Ibn Arabi: Differences in Practice. Islamic Religions Research Journal. 2017;4(6):151-74.

14.   Roustai Shalamani A, Zakeri A. Sanai and the Use of the Celestial Realm to Express Mystical Ideas in His Divan. Persian Language Studies (Shafaye Del). 2022;5(9):65-80.

15.   Va'ez Monfared S, Nasiri M, Rastgufard SM. The Idea of Liberation in Pre-Islamic Religious Traditions of Khorasan and Its Impact on Khorasan Sufism. Comparative Studies of Religions and Mysticism. 2018;2(3):89-112.

16.   Torabi Z, Nodehi K. The Image of Time in the Perception of Mysticism in Iran from the Beginning to the End of the 6th Century AH. Theological and Belief Studies (Islamic Sciences). 2015;5(18):37-48.

17.   Hakima F, Mohseni Nia N. Comparative Study of the Mystical Unity in the Thoughts of Attar Nishapuri and Ibn Arabi. Comparative Literature (Literature and Language Journal of the Faculty of Literature and Humanities in Kerman). 2017;9(17):21-39.

18.   Sanai Ghaznavi HFa-D. Divan-e Sanai. Tehran: Amir Kabir.

19.   Kasraei Far M, Ebrahimi H. Eschatological Mysticism in the Thoughts and Works of Abu al-Majd Sanai Ghaznavi. Religions and Mysticism (Articles and Reviews). 2013;46(2):277-99.

20.   Javadi Imamzadeh H, Behnamfar M. Critique of the Mystical Position of Sirr al-Ibad Based on the Personality Dimensions of Sanai. Mystical Literature (Humanities Al-Zahra). 2015;7(12):103-23.

21.   Kargar M, editor Critical Thoughts of Sanai in Hadiqat. International Conference of the Association for the Promotion of Persian Language and Literature in Iran; 2013.

22.   Mohammadi Kalesar A, Mousavi S, editors. Revisiting Humanism in Mystical Literature (Case Study: Humanism in the Thought of Sanai Ghaznavi Using Critical Analysis Method). International Conference of the Association for the Promotion of Persian Language and Literature in Iran; 2015.

23.   Bavandpouri S, editor Comparative Study of the Mystical Ideas of Sanai Ghaznavi and Rumi. Conference on Communication, Language, and Persian Literature and Linguistic Studies; 2016; Tehran.

24.   Asadollahi K, Fathi B. The Unifying Thought of Sanai Compared to Ibn Arabi. Mythological and Mystical Literature (Persian Language and Literature). 2011;7(24):9-36.

25.   Sayyadi A. The Position of the Perfect Human in Khorasan Mysticism. Nishapur: Farough Simorgh; 2024.

26.   Roodgar MJ. The Rational Asceticism and Vision in the School of Ibn Arabi. Mind. 2011(47):61-97.

27.   Ahmadvand A, Fayz al-Islam J. Aspects of Mysticism and Sufism in Andalusian Literature. Islamic Philosophy and Wisdom Research Journal. 2011;10(38):141-60.

28.   Ibn Arabi MIA. Al-Futuhat Al-Makkiyah. Cairo: Dar Al-Kitab Al-Arabi.

29.   Gharekhani N, Mohiyai N. Revisiting the Unity of Existence in the Thought of Ibn Arabi and Abdul Rahman Jami. Islamic Mysticism (Religions and Mysticism). 2022;18(71):117-36.

30.   Haghighi A, Zamani M, Sadeghi A, Momeni N. Searching for the Meaning of Life in the Thoughts of Avicenna and Ibn Arabi Regarding Death and Resurrection. Comparative Theology. 2018;9(20):1-14.

31.   Roodgar M. Khorasan Mysticism and Ibn Arabi: Theoretical Differences. Mystical Research Journal. 2018;10(18):51-71.

32.   Azim Baglou D, Tajfar S. Sanai, Poetry, and Mysticism. Islamic Mysticism (Religions and Mysticism). 2010;7(26):103-23.

33.   Mohammadi Kalesar A, Mousavi S. The Impact of Eschatology on the Mysticism of Sanai in Hadiqat al-Haqiqah. Mystical Literature and Mythology (Persian Language and Literature). 2017;13(49):173-201.