

Sufi Cosmology and Psychology

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The purpose of the present essay is to clear a heap of misunderstanding that has accrued around the Sufi concept of "latifa" (pl. *lataif*). As an adjective, the Arabic word *latif* means "subtle". During later development (12-17 centuries C.E.) of Sufism, particularly in the area of Iran, Turkestan, Afghanistan and India, a welter of elaborate and frequently conflicting systems of esoteric psychology and physiology had developed; partly generated by endless musings of Sufi contemplatives over Qur'anic verses and hadith in search of cognitive clarification of visionary experiences; or, less likely, due to Hindu-Buddhist cultural exposure and influence.

The author has an obligation to demarcate his presentation from other, equally frequent (or more frequent) elaborations that have, regardless of best intentions, succeeded (apart from enriching our vocabulary and glimmers of penetrating analyses, particularly when set in a comparative perspective) mostly in creating a quicksand-like confusion.

Therefore:

1. This article will *not* discuss dated Sufi archaic cosmology, which had arisen from the marriage of Hermetic spherical Ptolemaic cosmos and [Neoplatonic notions](#) that had percolated through [Ikhwan ul-Safa](#) and philosophers like Al-Farabi and Ibn-Sina/Avicenna. This particular variant constitutes one of the two strands in [Ibn-Arabi's](#) comprehensive theosophy (the other one being almost exclusively [Neoplatonic](#) in inspiration); this one serving as a theoretical basis for spiritual discipline in many tariqas/Sufi orders, where a stage in progression and purification of the "soul" (terms will be defined later) corresponds to a sphere/"planet" in Ptolemaic universe (Halveti, Mevlevi & other orders.) It would take us too far to delve into intricacies of the two doctrines, which under closer examination turn out to be irreconcilable and contradictory.
2. The following text will use Arabic and Persian technical terms only insofar as they constitute basic building elements of the exposition. Also, parallels with other esoteric doctrines will be drawn just to illustrate common bonds of spiritual experience.
3. This is not a historical review, nor a textbook on the particular aspect of Sufi contemplative life. So, only sketchy references on the most influential figures and practices will be found.

The plan of the essay is as follows:

1. To give an overview of Sufi cosmology and psychology (these two overlap to the degree that an exposition of one without the other would invalidate the entire effort).
2. To analyze the so-called *Lataif Sitta* and its role in Sufi spiritual life. Also, various dubieties will be concisely addressed, as well as some historical milestones.

The author has tried to use the most authoritative and explicit literature he has yet found. Although these works exhibit familiar "fuzziness" and indeterminacy in approach, they by far surpass more popular and "alluring" fictions and treatises of Idries Shah or A.H.Almaas.



References:

Mir Valiuddin: *Contemplative Disciplines in Sufism*

Mir Valiuddin: *Quranic Sufism*

Javad Nurbaksh: *The Psychology of Sufism*

The Sufi Journal, 1994-1995

Titus Burckhardt: *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*

Henry Corbin: *History of Islamic Philosophy*

Sufi Cosmology

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We will present two doctrines, both based on Qur'anic revelation enriched and clarified (or corrupted- depending on one's taste) by [Neoplatonic](#) emanationist cosmology.

A. According to the first doctrine ([ref](#)), God has three dimensions/modes of Being before creation, followed by three worlds/planes of created cosmos.

1. The unfathomable God's Essence; Abyss of the Unmanifest Absolute. The Sufi technical terms are: *Ghayb ul-Ghaib* (Mystery of Mysteries), *Amma* (Darkness), *Dhat/Zat* (Essence).

The corresponding spiritual stage is called Ahadiyyat- Oneness.

This is equal to Plotinus's One - [To Hen](#) , or to the Shaivite Tantric *Paramashiva* or *Mahabindu*.

2. The Manifest Absolute/God. The Sufi terms are *Ar-Ruh al-Qudsi* (the Supreme Spirit), *Aql-i-Awwal* (First Intellect) or *Aql-i-Kulli* (Universal Intellect).

The corresponding spiritual stage is named *Wahdah*. The Neoplatonic equivalent of the Plotinus's doctrine would be [Nous](#) (Divine Mind), while certain schools of Tantricism speak of Shiva, or Shiva/Shakti union.

N.B. There are tariqas and scholars who deny divine status of the First Intellect and relegate it to the realm of creation.

3. The God's creative energy as manifested through divine names and attributes (*ayan at'-thabita*). The "energy"/creative aspect is clear from identification with Qur'anic notion of *Nafas-i-Rahmani* (The Breath of Mercy). Also, it is termed *Nafs-i-Kulliya* (Universal Soul).

The spiritual stage is *Wahdaniyyat*.

The exact correspondence is with Plotinus's [Psyche](#) (World Soul).

Shaivite texts refer to Shakti as activated Shiva's creative energy.

N.B. Having in mind all similarities with Neoplatonism, one must not overlook the difference: in [Plotinus](#)'s system, emanations are [hypostases](#) of the One, flowing, as it were, "outward" and signifying the degradation of the Absolute. On the other hand, the above noted processes represent a desirable unfoldment of the Absolute in Sufi mythic cosmology.

B. The second doctrine ([ref](#)) operates with two concepts.

1. The Unmanifest Absolute (*Alam-i-Hahut*/the "world" of "He-ness", Hu-He being the Arabic term pertaining to God's Essence prior to manifestation. The "world" is just a symbolic reference. This, unmanifest dimension is frequently referred to only as *Hahut*). Of course, all other Arabic names given under the point 1. of the first doctrine are valid. The spiritual stage is *Ahadiyyat*.

2. The manifest Absolute (*Alam-i-Lahut*/the "world" of God-ness, the root "*Lah*" one and the same as in *Al-Lah* (God). Also, generally spoken of as *Lahut*). The spiritual stage pertaining to Lahut is sometimes referred to as *Wahdah*, sometimes as *Wahadiyyat*. There is no consensus communis re this matter.

3. Both above elucidated doctrines share the same terminology re the stages of manifestation (*tanazzulat*) of the created cosmos. Following the emanationist scheme, we have top to bottom (of course, not literally; these are dimensions of manifestation conveniently stratified):

4. *Alam-i-Jabarut*/the world of power; also *Alam-i-Arwah* (the world of spirits; *ruh* meaning spirit, *arwah* being the plural form). Roughly corresponding to the world of Platonic archetypes, Shaivite Shivaloka (the world of Shiva), or causal world of Western occultism.

5. *Alam-i-Malakut*/the world of angels. This somewhat incongruous term is frequently replaced by *Alam-i-Mithal*/the world of similitudes. This Henry Corbin's famous *mundus imaginalis*/world of imagination, Tantric Antarloka (the intermediary world), or subtle/astro-mental world of Western occultists.

6. *Alam-i-Nasut*/the world of humanity, better designated as *Alam-i-Ajsam*/the world of bodies. Tantric tradition speaks of *Bhuloka*/the world of earth. In Western occultism, the name is gross or physical world.

To summarise on tabular form:

Kosmos / <i>Alam</i> Sufi terminology	Kosmos (general)	Neoplatonic equivalent - Plotinus	Tantric equivalent	Western occultism - Theosophy and contemporary Hermeticism
Hahut	The Unmanifest Absolute	The One	Paramashiva	--
Lahut	The Manifest Absolute	The Nous	Shiva-tattwa	--
Jabarut	Causal World	--	Shivaloka (world of Shiva)	Causal Plane
Malakut	Subtle World	--	Tantric Antarloka (intermediary world)	Mental Plane Astral Plane
Nasut	Physical World	--	Bhuloka (world of earth)	gross or physical



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Sufi Psychology

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Anyone who has delved into the study of Sufi psychology knows how chaotic and susceptible to wildest interpretations this field lies helpless before New Age predators and dogmatic and ill-informed shaykhs alike. We will adumbrate central tenets and point to differences of opinion preventing the growth of a coherent doctrine.

Drawing from Qur'anic verses, virtually all Sufis distinguish between nafs, qalb and ruh, the preceding concepts having the meaning of various psychospiritual "organs", faculties of suprasensory perception or foci of contemplative experience. Their number (additional faculties will be listed below), location, function, hierarchy, characteristics- all this is a matter of dispute.

1. *Nafs* is usually translated as soul or psyche. (We won't elaborate on etymology because it would take us too far.). Some Sufis consider under the term "nafs" the entirety of mental/emotional/volitional life; however, the majority are of the opinion that nafs is a "lower", egotistical and passionate human nature. Along with *tab* (literally, nature - a physical one), it comprises vegetative and animal aspects of human life (in the vocabulary of medieval Thomist psychology). Synonyms for nafs are devil, passion, greed, avarice, ego-centredness etc. The central aim of the Sufi path is transformation of nafs from its deplorable ego-centered state through various psychospiritual stages (*hal*- temporary, and *maqam*- permanent) to either purity and submission to the will of God (orthodox Sufis) or annihilation and deification (unorthodox Sufis who are frequently lost in a maze of questions which part of nafs is destroyed and which one is deified or fused with God).

2. *Qalb* stands for heart. In Sufi terminology, this spiritual heart (not a pump in the breast) is again variously described. For some, it is the seat of beatific vision. Others consider it the place of divine love/ishq. Yet, for the majority, it is the battlefield of two warring armies- those of nafs (where *nafs-i-natiqa*/rational soul is equated with aql/intellect, the "better", rational part of the soul as opposed to animal/passionate), and ruh/spirit, who will be the object of analysis in the next point. In short, cleansing of the qalb/heart is a necessary spiritual discipline for travellers on the Sufi path.

3. *Ruh* or spirit is the third "entity" and the second contender in the battle for human life. Again, opinions on ruh differ among Sufis. Some deem it coeternal with God; others consider it a created entity. Be as it may, ruh is the plateau of consensus for the majority of Sufis, especially early ones (before 11/12 century C.E.). After ruh, opinions diverge even more (with the addition that probably the majority of Sufis even don't pay attention to the supposed "higher" spiritual faculties or subsume them under the variety of ruh/spirit- related experiences).

The three "highest" spiritual faculties are a matter of controversy. Here, we will follow explications offered by spiritual giants Jurjani (14.century C.E.) and

Ruzbekhan Bakhli Shirazi (12/13 century C.E.), both Iranian Sufis ([ref](#), [ref](#)). While holding centrality of these doctrines indisputable, we shall also mention interpretation of these functions or faculties according to the Naqshbandi order of the Sufis.

Three "higher" organs of spiritual perception are sirr, khafi and akhfa.

4. *Sirr* or secret is the centre of inner consciousness where perceptual contact with the Divine is accomplished. Judging from Hallaj's words, this is a faculty whereby one attains union with his/her Higher/Spiritual Self."..It has been said that the inner consciousness/sirr is part of the ultimate inner consciousness that is God... It is recounted that Husayn ibn Mansur Hallaj said "My sirr is virgin, and cannot be revealed by imagination of anybody" ([ref](#)) From these passages one could deduce that sirr is the faculty of fusion with the Divine, but in its "particular" aspect of Spiritual Self. *N.B.* The Semnani attributions place the sirr below ruh/spirit. For him, it is virtually equivalent to mind. We shall address this, and similar issues, later.

5. *Khafi* or the arcane is, according to Jurjani, the seat of apperception of the Manifest Absolute/Lahut. (Although the concept "seat" is a bit problematic. Maybe the term "faculty" would be more appropriate.) "..In Sufi terminology, the arcane/khafi is a divine subtlety which lies in potential in the spirit/ruh....the arcane becomes the intermediary between the Divine presence and the spirit/ruh in receiving theophany of Divine Attributes and God's emanating grace to the spirit." ([ref](#))

6. *Akhfa* or the most arcane/the innermost consciousness represents immersion in God's Essence of the Unmanifest Absolute. In Ruzbekhan Shirazi's words, "..The innermost consciousness/akhfa is equivalent to the Ultimate Unseen (*Ghayb-ul-Ghaib*)([ref](#)).

So, before briefly presenting the main historical currents and discussing the Lataif phenomenology, we shall draw, as it were, one-to-one parallel between seats/faculties of psychospiritual apperception and the dimensions of Kosmos and its origin.

Latifa	Kosmos /Alam Sufi terminology	Kosmos (general)
Akhfa/ the most arcane	Hahut	The Unmanifest Absolute
Khafi/arcane	Lahut	The Manifest Absolute
Sirr/secret	Lahut(particularia)	Higher Self
Ruh/spirit	Jabarut/Arwah	causal/noetic
Qalb/heart	Malakut/Mithal	subtle/imaginal
Nafs/soul Tab/nature	Nasut/Ajsam	lower subtle mundane physical



References:

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The Lataif

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A brief historical overview

Since our central interest is location of main signposts of the Lataif approach to Sufi psychospiritual doctrine and practice, we will address only those names and occurrences pertaining to the subject.

The true history of the Lataif Sitta begins with the Turkestani shaykh Najm-ud-din Kubra (12/13. centuries C.E.), the founder of the Kubrawiyya order ([ref](#)). His numerous visionary experiences bear the distinctive mark of what was to become the "trademark" of the Lataif approach: color, or "photisms" associated with levels of spiritual advancement. Although, in all likelihood, he didn't assign different spiritual "organs" to various parts of the body, his influence has proven to be decisive.

Among his spiritual descendants, [Ala-ud-din Semnani](#) (13/14.century C.E.) has built an intricate system in which a network of correspondences between prophets (Abraham, Jesus,..), lataif (*qalb*, *ruh*,..) and colors was established. ([ref](#)) Yet, there is no unanimity re the nature of lataif, or their respective order. For instance, Semnani's scheme places latifa *sirr*/secret below (or, before) latifa *ruh*/spirit, whereas other blueprints of "spiritual physiology" reverse the order. Other two important Sufi masters were Jurjani and Ruzbekhan Baqli Shirazi (14.century C.E.), their chief works being treatises, spiritual diaries and theosophical commentaries.

However, other spiritual currents moulded esoteric "geography". One of them was powerful Naqshbandi order, whose central figure in the revival of Islamic orthodoxy in the Indian subcontinent was a controversial figure of Ahmad Sirhindi/Mujaddid (17. century C.E.). A man of deep spiritual insight, boldness and personal charisma, he undisputedly left the heritage of Islamic exclusivism, bigotry and communal tension. Our main concern here lies in his legacy of redesignment of the Lataif Sitta and the attributions that are still practiced in the Mujaddidiyya branch of the Naqshbandi order (named after him). Common Sufi concepts of *fana* and *baqa* (annihilation/effacement and subsistence- referring to various stages of *vita purgativa* and *vita unitiva*) were assigned to different lataif. For instance, the Naqshbandi blueprint is as follows ([ref](#)):

Nafs- under the navel (blue)

Qalb- on the left side of the chest (yellow)

Ruh- on the right side of the chest, below the nipple (red)
Sirr- between Qalb and Ruh, adjacent to the left nipple (white)
Khafi- in the forehead, or adjacent to the right nipple (black)
Akhfa- in the brain, or, alternately, in the centre of the chest (green)

Spiritual practice is *dhikr*/invocation of God's names, sometimes visualized in Arabic script in respective colors; hence, superficially a form of Islamic mantra-yoga with mantras located in foci of spiritual consciousness, similar to the [Tantric tradition](#). Only- this resemblance is deceptive, because, from the indeterminacy and "laxity" of the enumerated correspondences *latifa*- physical location, follows arbitrariness of the entire scheme.

The last (and the most genuine) modus of interdependence of esoteric ideas was assimilation of chakra system of Nath yoga within the practice of the Shattari order, through the agency of shaykh Muhammad Ghawth (16. century C.E.)([ref](#))

Conclusion

Our main interest in this essay lay in exposition of the Lataif doctrine. Having adumbrated key concepts & raisons for a multiplicity of spiritual practices, we would like to end with a few nagging questions that haunt anyone who has seriously analyzed and dissected the Lataif Sitta problem:

From rudimentary Qur'anic concepts of *nafs*, *qalb* and *ruh*, an intricate and at the same time contradictory network of esoteric correspondences and practices grew, combining a multitude of extraneous *Weltanschauungen* like Hermetic cosmology, [Neoplatonic](#) philosophy, [Gnostic](#) teaching on the divine spark, [Tantric](#) "baroque" meditative rituals and so forth.

However, crucial concepts remained fuzzy and undefined:

- a) It is not clear whether these psychological terms correspond to real, although to a degree dormant, organs of the psychospiritual perception?
- b) Although some authors are explicit about the existence of the subtle body/*jism-i-latif*, there is no unanimity regarding this matter. Any automatic reference to the Hindu concept of [koshas](#) is inappropriate. So, even those who work with these "subtleties" (*latifa*, pl. *lataif*) are equivocal on the matter of assigning those subtleties to the [subtle/latif body](#). The majority even don't take this body under consideration.
- c) There is no unanimity regarding the number of *lataif*. Some consider *khafi*, *akhfa*, or, even *sirr*, to be only deeper layers (or core(s)) of other, more common *lataif* like *qalb* or *ruh*. Some orders, like Halveti, consider all *lataif* to be different dimensions/layers of the *latifa qalb/heart*.
- d) Even those who operate with all *lataif* separately, locate them in different parts of the body, or assign them different colors (Sirhindi permuted Semnani's colors of *qalb/heart* and *ruh/spirit*).

e) The alluring association of the Lataif Sitta with the Tantric esoteric physiology is deluding. In Tantricism, [chakras](#) perform a multiplicity of psychophysiological functions as defined in Ayurvedic medicine. The lataif have no physiological functions *per se*. More: the central mythic power defining the Hindu Tantra, Kundalini Shakti, has no equivalent in the Sufi psycho-symbology.

Our conclusion would be that the rudimentary Qur'anic psychological terms, enriched and expanded by the already existing vast and conflicting welter of [Gnostic](#), [Neoplatonic](#) and Hermetic teachings, formed a system of psychospiritual correspondences resembling partially the [Kabbalistic](#) one. The true ancestor of the *Lataif Sitta*, in its most widespread impersonations, lies in the Eastern Mediterranean, not in the rainforest of the [Hindu-Buddhist](#) tradition.



Literature

Mir Valiuddin: *Contemplative Disciplines in Sufism*
The Sufi Journal, 1994-1995

More on the Latifa

M.Alan Kazlev

The Four Lataif

In [Sufism](#), reference is often made to a number of subtle organs or centres, called *latiaf* (singular *latifa*), each of which is associated with a particular colour and psychospiritual faculty. The simplest version of this is described by Idries Shah and, quoting him, Kenneth Raynor Johnson, who give the following correspondences:

Intuition	khafi	black	forehead
Mind ("heart")	qalb	yellow	left side of body
Spirit	ruh	red	right side of body
Consciousness	sirr	white	solar plexis

Kenneth Johnson observes that these are the standard colours of Western alchemy, and that if the hand follows the body positions in the usual alchemical sequence - black, white, yellow and red - the result is the action of crossing oneself. One wonders then whether there may not be some Knights Templar or other esoteric Christian influence here, although Johnson points out that this is not an exclusively Christian gesture.

I might add that these colours also correspond in part to the three subtle states of consciousness (shunyas or "empties") in Tibetan Buddhism: i.e.: "the mind of white appearance", "the mind of red near-attainment", and "the mind of black near-attainment"; this last being followed by the Clear Light or direct experience of Reality.

Alaoddawleh Semnani - the seven latif

A much more developed doctrine of lataif was formulated by the 13th/14th century Persian Sufi Alaoddawleh Semnani. Linking the seven prophets of the Koran with the mystical physiology of seven *latifa*, Semnani referred to seven grades of being which constitute the ascent of the soul to the Godhead. These are the *latifah qalibiyya*, the mould (= the theosophical "etheric body") or "Adam of one's being", black or dark-grey in colour; the *latifah nafsiyya*, the vital senses and animal soul, the "Noah of one's being", blue in colour; the *latifah qalbiyya*, the spiritual Heart, the "Abraham of one's being", red in colour; the *latifah sirriyya*, the Secret, the edge of superconsciousness and stage of spiritual monologues (c.f., the Throat Chakra) or "Moses of one's being", white in colour; the *latifah ruhiyya*, the Spirit which is the vice-regent of God (c.f. Ajna = "Command" chakra), the "David of one's being", yellow in colour; the *latifah khafiyya* or organ of spiritual inspiration, the "Jesus of one's being", luminous black in colour; and finally the *latifah haqiqqa*, the Divine Centre or Eternal Seal, the "Mohammed of one's being", emerald green, this being the sacred colour of Islam.

It would seem that Semnani's *latifa* have a double meaning: they refer both to psychic centres (=chakras) and to a succession of subtle bodies (Sanskrit *kosha*, Greek *okhema*) or levels of self. It is interesting that some modern clairvoyant and theosophical writers, who are totally ignorant of this particular Sufi teaching, also match up the seven chakras with seven bodies or levels of self (e.g. according to Barbara Brennan the base or Muladhara chakra corresponds to the etheric body, the second or Swadhishtana chakra to the emotional body, and so on), and also to colours (usually a rainbow sequence from red through to violet). Even though the two sets of correspondences are quite distinct, the principle of their equivalence is nevertheless quite similar.