

The Mystical Experience in Algerian Vernacular Poetry: A Reading of the Thought of Kaddour Ben Achour El-Zerhouni

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Abstract: The vernacular poet Kaddour Ben Achour El-Zerhouni stands as one of the most prominent figures in Algerian vernacular poetry (*Sbi'r al-Malhoun*), carving a distinctive niche across literary and artistic domains before his creative journey steered him toward Sufi mysticism. His poetic repertoire encompasses a diverse spectrum of classical and folk genres—including prophetic eulogy (*madih*), supplication (*tawassul*), panegyric (*madh*), description (*wasf*), and nostalgic longing (*hanin*)—whose lexicon and thematic execution reflect a profound spiritual realization. Concurrently, his poetry navigates multidimensional planes of esoteric experience, transitioning fluidly through symbolic depictions of femininity, mystical wine allegories (*khamriyyat*), and transcendent divine love (*'ishq ilahî*). Grounded in the conceptual apparatus of Islamic mysticism (*Tasawwuf*) and textual hermeneutics, this paper investigates the mystical experience within Kaddour Ben Achour's poetic corpus through rigorous textual analysis and critical representation.

Keywords: Sufism; Algerian Vernacular Poetry; Malhoun; Kaddour Ben Achour El-Zerhouni; Mystical Experience; Divine Love; Esoteric Hermeneutics.

Introduction

The investigation of mysticism within literary discourse highlights the pervasive influence of Sufism on popular culture and the performing arts across the Maghreb in general, and Algeria in particular. Scholars, litterateurs, and folk bards drew systematically upon Sufi epistemological frameworks—invoking ascetics, order leaders (*shaykhs* of the *Tariqas*), and gnostics (*'arifin*)—to enrich their creative output and anchor spiritual, moral, social, and political discourses among working-class communities, articulating their daily struggles and aspirations.

This adoption of Sufi motifs was not restricted to elite prose texts; it migrated organically into vernacular oral poetry and musical traditions across the Maghreb, notably through *Chaabi*, Andalusian, and *Malouf* traditions. In these musical forms, poems of prophetic devotion, entreaty, and asceticism became everyday expressions recited in community plazas, cafes, and homes. Sufi thought shifted from secluded retreats into a living cultural practice, refining

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the aesthetic and emotional sensibilities of the public (Djab El-Kheir, 2023).

This orientation was reinforced by the Sufi lodge (*ṣawīya*), which served as a vital community hub. The *ṣawīya* was never merely an ascetic sanctuary; it functioned as an open social refuge offering material and psychological support to travelers, the poor, and the marginalized. Literature nurtured in this environment developed a grounded spiritual realism, combining reliance on God (*tawakkul*) and patience (*sabr*) with calls for community solidarity during social and economic crises.

During foreign domination and colonial occupation, Sufi imagery, saintly miracles (*karama*), and ascetic poems served as cultural protection for national identity. Renunciation verses operated as coded expressions of collective mobilization and moral resilience, demonstrating that Sufi orders formed a protective core around collective consciousness during periods of cultural suppression.

Within this creative context, vernacular mystical poetry—*al-Malboun*—emerged as a major medium through which Algerian folk poets conveyed spiritual insights. Kaddour Ben Achour El-Zerhouni stands out among these masters, using accessible yet layered vernacular phrasing to articulate world-renouncing asceticism and unadulterated divine love (El-Zerhouni, 1995).

This study investigates Algerian mystical vernacular poetry through the lens of Ben Achour's work. The central research questions explore: How did Ben Achour reconcile the technical demands of vernacular poetic forms with esoteric mystical experiences? Through what textual mechanisms did his folk verses capture subtle spiritual states? And how did his writing transition across symbolic levels, moving from earthly metaphors to unitive contemplation?

I. The Concept and Evolution of Sufism (*Tasawwuf*)

Sufism represents the experiential and spiritual core of Islamic civilization. Far from being a rigid doctrinal system, it is a lived affective path aimed at inner purification, moral elevation, and experiential knowledge of the Divine (*ma'rifa*). Historically, it originated during the first centuries of Islam as an intuitive ascetic movement (*ṣūbā*) reacting against political strife and material indulgence. By the third and fourth centuries AH, it developed into a formalized discipline with a dedicated technical vocabulary and gnostic epistemology, before institutionalizing in later centuries into widespread educational brotherhoods—such as the Qadiriyya, Shadhiliyya, and Rahmaniyya—with deep social roots (Fattah, 1993).

At its core, Sufi philosophy emphasizes divine love, ethical humility, renunciation of ephemeral vanities, and contemplation of inward truth (*al-batīn*) alongside outward form (*al-ẓāhir*). This symbolic depth provided poets and artists with an expressive lexicon capable of translating interior states and existential longings.

1. Etymological Origins

Scholars have long debated the etymological roots of the term *Tasawwuf*. Al-Wasifi (2001) notes the hypothesis that traces the term to the Greek *sophia* (wisdom), though Arabic grammarians question this derivation due to structural divergence. The most recognized etymological attribution links the term to coarse wool (*suf*), reflecting the ascetic practice of wearing humble wool garments as an outward sign of renunciation.

In his classic treatise, Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri (1998) argued that the word functions largely as a designated honorific rather than a simple morphological derivative, observing that while donning wool was widespread among early ascetics, the community was defined by their inner devotion rather than their garb. Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi (2001) in *Al-Ta'arruf li-Madhbhab Ahl al-Tasawwuf* underscored the root *safa* (purity): "They were named Sufis because of the purity of their inner secrets and the innocence of their deeds." He also quoted Bishr ibn al-Harith al-Hafi: "The Sufi is one whose heart is pure toward God."

2. Terminological Definitions

Terminological definitions of Sufism emphasize inward purification and self-rectification. Sufism is widely defined as the discipline through which one learns to direct the self toward the presence of God, purging inward vices and acquiring virtuous traits (Al-Qushayri, 1993, 1998). Master practitioners describe it as passing from outward compliance with Sacred Law (*Shari'ah*) to experiential taste of Spiritual Reality (*Haqiqah*). Imam al-Junayd encapsulated this path: "Sufism is the renunciation of every selfish desire and the complete turning of one's whole being unto God" (Al-Qushayri, 1993).

Varying cultural and spiritual standpoints have yielded complementary characterizations:

- **Abu Hafs al-Haddad:** "It is consummate courtesy and spiritual decorum (*tamam al-adab*)."
- **Abu al-Hasan al-Nuri:** "The trait of the Sufi is serene stillness when deprived, and selfless altruism (*ithar*) when

possessing."

- **Farid al-Din 'Attar:** *"It is the direct fruit of spiritual labor and experiential states, not a consequence of rote memorization and theological disputation"* (Attar, 2006).

- **Ahmad Zarruq:** *"He whose primary concern is ritual devotion is a worshiper; he whose dominant motive is forsaking superfluous vanity is an ascetic; and he whose consciousness is consumed by viewing the Real through negating created intermediaries is a gnostic"* (Zarruq, 2005).

II. Textual Representations of Sufi Terminology in Ben Achour's Poetic Genres

1. Prophetic Eulogy and Praise (*Al-Madih*)

Prophetic panegyric serves as a foundational pillar of Algerian *Malhoun* poetry. Renowned poets like Sidi Lakhdar Ben Khrouf and Cheikh Smati drew extensively upon the Sufi lexicon to construct popular hymns of devotion. In their verses, expressions of Muhammadan love and reverence for saintly figures merged with reflections on everyday communal life, transforming devotional singing into an instrument of spiritual identity and cultural preservation (Djab El-Kheir, 2023).

Ben Achour built his poetic voice within this devotional framework. In the opening movement of his celebrated ode *Al-Hadi Ra's Mali* (The Guide Is My Capital), he writes:

*"I begin in the Name of God, speaking forth and advancing boldly in my discourse,
Multiplying my blessings upon the Guide, who is my true capital and sovereign wealth."*

He concludes the poem with an explicit declaration of spiritual allegiance:

*"And peace be upon the Messenger Prophet,
My master Muhammad, the supreme guide of every holy protector."*

Opening with the *Basmala* follows the traditional conventions of Maghrebi *Malhoun*, invoking divine sanction before approaching praise of the Prophet. The assertive expression *"speaking forth and advancing boldly"* (*naqul wa-nasul*) suggests that poetry serves here as an explicit public declaration of faith rather than mere aesthetic diversion. Metaphorically designating the Prophet as his *"capital"* (*ra's mali*) adapts a vernacular commercial term to express absolute spiritual reliance: for marginalized communities lacking worldly wealth, love for the Prophet represents an enduring spiritual asset (El-Zerhouni, 1995).

In his ode *Na'ti Min Na'tik Ya Taha* (My Description Derives from Yours, O Taha), Ben Achour approaches unitive metaphysical contemplation without preamble:

*"Name God, the Single, the Incomparable Witr,
In Whose grasp alone lie all paths and outcomes;
The Everlasting throughout eternity of eternities,
While all besides Him is fleeting and perishing;
He is the servant and He is the worshiped sanctuary,
Whence comes my entire existence in that profound truth;
O my master Ahmad, O Muhammad,
May the peace and blessings of God forever envelope you!"*

These verses demonstrate that *Malhoun* accommodated complex Sufi doctrines, including unitive witnessing (*wahdat al-shuhud*) and spiritual annihilation (*fana'*), presenting them in concise rhythm accessible to both ordinary listeners and initiates. The pervasive presence of Qur'anic expressions (e.g., *al-Witr*, *al-Da'im*, *halik*) anchors the verse within scriptural tradition.

2. Elegy (*Al-Ritha'*)

Elegy is one of the oldest genres in Arabic poetry, traditionally serving to mourn loss, commemorate personal virtue, and reflect on mortality (Al-Najjar & Jaber, 2012). In his religious lament for the spiritual guide Cheikh Ben Yelles, Ben Achour infuses personal bereavement with Sufi metaphysics:

*"In the Name of God, peace and protection
 From every worldly calamity and distress;
 I weep with overflowing, pouring tears
 Over Ben Yelles, who has passed away.
 Ben Yelles, the venerable and majestic,
 May God exalt his sublime spiritual rank!
 Ben Yelles has disappeared into the divine Presence of God,
 And I remain behind, weeping in sorrow at his departure;
 He was a vast ocean of boundless wisdom,
 The exemplary model for all rememberers of God."*

Beginning with prayers for endurance, the poem frames the master's death not as an absolute end, but as an ecstatic dissolution into the Divine Presence (*ghaba fi hadrat Allah*). Mourning is thereby elevated from ordinary lamentation into an acknowledgment of spiritual guidance and continuity (El-Zerhouni, 1995).

3. Descriptive Verse (*Al-Wasf*)

Descriptive poetry (*wasf*) traditionally renders tangible entities and natural changes, broadly categorized into static descriptions of objects and dynamic observations of nature (Al-Hawi, 1980). In his pastoral ode *Al-Rabi'iyah* (The Vernal Ode), Ben Achour describes spring as a reflection of divine creative beauty:

*"I begin in the Name of God, seeking guidance, acceptance, and security,
 With blessings upon the bearer of the crown and noble lineage.
 The vernal season of spring has arrived in abundance and grace,
 The hour of fortunate glad tidings has entered with joy;
 The almond blossoms and tender cane have adorned themselves with corals,
 This blissful season awakens love and ravishes the hearts of passionate lovers."*

By opening with the *Basmala* and praises for the Prophet, the natural world is read through a sacramental lens. Springtime renewal evokes inner spiritual awakening, where natural beauty mirrors eternal creative truth.

4. Nostalgia, Homeland, and Spiritual Exile (*Al-Hanin*)

Nostalgic poetry (*hanin*) conveys longing for one's origin and homeland (Ibn Manzur, 1997). In Ben Achour's verse, physical displacement often overlaps with existential and spiritual longing. In *Ruh li-Nedroma 'Aylan* (Speed Hastily to Nedroma), he channels this dual exile:

*"In the Name of God it came to pass, by the decree of the Majestic, our Sustainer,
 God, the Supreme Judge, source of all virtuous character,
 By Whom the arduous hardship was made easy, for the sake of Taba, son of Yamina...
 O descendant of the wild doves dwelling in our ancestral house,
 I write an epistle for you: convey it swiftly to our beloved companions!
 Into the protecting hands of the Merciful I entrust you, O winged messenger:
 O gentle dove, bear our heartfelt greetings to our native land!
 Your heart is serene and untroubled, O dove of the woods,
 No trials or darkened sorrows weigh upon your breast,
 Rejoicing continuously through night and day."*

The contrast between the unburdened dove and the exiled poet reflects spiritual estrangement. Drawing heavily on

sacred names (*al-Jalil, al-Dayyan, al-Rahman*), the poem frames geographic absence as an inward journey toward reliance on God (El-Zerhouni, 1995).

This spiritual nostalgia is underscored in *Nakhlāt Sultan al-Anliya'* (The Palm Trees of the Sovereign of Saints):

*"You have caused my eyes to weep bitterly,
O towering palm trees standing before the Master of Spiritual Poles,
The sovereign of the saintly protectors!
You have withered dry and turned to lifeless firewood,
Following the passing of the sacred circle of presence (al-hadriyya)."*

Projecting grief onto the withered palms mirrors the poet's own sorrow over the dispersion of communal Sufi remembrance circles (*al-hadra*). The loss of physical fellowship transforms the sacred grove into dry wood, lamenting the decline of shared spiritual practice.

III. Levels of Mystical Discourse in El-Zerhouni's Poetics

1. The Dimension of Femininity and Mystical Eroticism

In Sufi literature, the feminine form often functions as an allegorical mirror for the beauty of the Divine (Ibn Arabi's *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*). While Ben Achour uses the conventions of sensory lyricism (*ghazal*), his verses routinely point toward transcendental contemplation, as shown in *Silsilat Imam al-Banat* (The Necklace of the Leader of Maidens):

*"Prolonged is this appointment for me, and I have grown weary of waiting;
On what day will you come to me, O leader of all maidens?
Could I but gain an hour in your presence to behold your grace,
I wait upon your spectral vision, O crown of every noble inheritance!
Her eyebrows are two arched letters Nun, radiating joyful light,
Poised within two bow-lengths (qaba qawsayn), brandishing piercing darts;
Her eyelashes are languid, her dark eyes alluringly profound,
Her radiant cheeks shine like glowing lanterns in the dark;
Her delicate lips part over glistening teeth,
Her slender neck shines like early dawn—astonishing all who behold her beauty!"*

While describing physical attributes (brows, eyelashes, lips, and neck), the inclusion of the Qur'anic phrase "*two bow-lengths*" (*qaba qawsayn*, Qur'an 53:9) links the imagery to the Prophet's heavenly ascension (*al-Mi'raj*). Human beauty is treated as an earthly sign reflecting celestial perfection (El-Zerhouni, 1995).

2. The Dimension of Nature

In *Al-Rabi'iyah*, Ben Achour portrays the natural world as a canvas of cosmic manifestation:

*"This is the season of spring, vibrant with radiant blossoms and flowers,
A tranquil sanctuary for lovers, granting unalloyed delight;
This blessed season enraptures the hearts of passionate seekers,
While gifted souls weave delicate, yearning verses of devotion."*

Nature is represented not as an inert backdrop, but as a dynamic space facilitating spiritual retreat (*khalwa*) and contemplation of divine creation.

3. The Dimension of Divine Theophany (*Al-Tajalli al-Ilahi*) and Mystical Wine

At his highest level of poetic expression, Ben Achour moves beyond sensory metaphor to address ecstatic contemplation and unitive consciousness:

*"I departed beyond my own words when I truly recognized Him: Allah! Allah! Allah!
The sovereign kingdom of paradise radiates with His light: Allah! Allah! Allah!
My worldly reputation dissolved away for the sake of the One I adore: Allah! Allah! Allah!"*

The surrender of outward reputation captures the spirit of the *Malamatiyya* path, where societal regard is abandoned in pursuit of sincere devotion. This ecstatic vision is further developed in the unitive dialogue of *Man Anti wa-Man Ana* (Who Are You and Who Am I?):

*"As the Cupbearer quenched my thirst with the overflowing bounty of His wine,
Radiantly sparkling in the chalice, illuminating all with splendor;
I drank it purely unmixed and became enraptured in its inner meanings,
Dancing in gratitude before that presence, whose praise is supreme.
I said to the Cupbearer who poured the cup: 'Who are you, and who am I?'
He answered me: 'We are united together; our purity is one with its purity.'
Our wine is uncreated, pristine, intrinsically pure and beautiful,
Subtle, more delicate than the softest whisper of a breeze;
It is a mirror within the hearts of true gnostics,
Through which they behold a vision without limits or end.
Send your blessings and peace, O Lord, continuously upon the Prophet,
And upon his family and all his companions together!"*

Echoing classical masters such as Umar Ibn al-Farid and Abu Madyan, the vocabulary of wine, chalice, and cupbearer serves as a deliberate allegory for the knowledge of God. The phrase *"We are united together; our purity is one with its purity"* (*nahnu jam'an safā'una safāha*) reflects the realization of spiritual convergence, where dualistic self-regard dissolves before unitive truth.

Conclusion

This critical study of Kaddour Ben Achour El-Zerhouni's mystical poetry leads to several overarching conclusions:

1. **Spiritual Interiority as Refuge:** Ben Achour's experience of social and physical exile prompted an inward turn toward Sufi contemplation, finding in esoteric truths a refuge from temporal distress.
2. **Thematic Breadth and Unified Spiritual Vision:** Although his compositions encompass diverse vernacular genres—panegyric, elegy, nature lyric, and nostalgia—they remain unified by an underlying devotional ethos.
3. **Strategic Hermeneutic Code:** His poetry relies heavily on classical mystical symbols (wine, feminine beauty, desert doves, and withered palms), allowing vernacular verse to carry complex theological and experiential reflections.
4. **Tripartite Thematic Architecture:** His poetic corpus moves through three integrated levels—the human/feminine form, the natural cosmos, and unitive theophany—illustrating that Maghrebi *Malboun* was fully capable of articulating sophisticated mystical states.
5. **Cultural and Literary Legacy:** Cheikh Kaddour Ben Achour El-Zerhouni remains an exemplary figure in Algerian vernacular literature, demonstrating how oral poetic traditions preserved and communicated spiritual thought within popular culture.

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