

A Preliminary Comparison Between European Mystics in the 14th Century and Sumatran Sufis in the 16th-17th Centuries

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ABSTRACT: This study offers a comparative examination of the mysticism practiced by European spiritual thinkers in the 14th century and Sumatran Sufis in the 16th to 17th centuries, revealing striking inter-cultural similarities in their spiritual quests secluded from the urban tumult. These mystics, though divided by geographic and temporal distances, engaged profoundly with religious metaphysics, passionately expressing their spiritual explorations through sermons, literary compositions, and poetry. Central to their discourse was the relationship between the individual and the divine, with a particular focus on the soul's crucial role in seeking spiritual fulfillment. The investigation highlights how these mystics from both the East and West tackled similar existential queries and embraced comparable methods of religious contemplation, which reflects a universal quest for understanding the divine essence. Recurring themes include the nature of divine love, the pursuit of spiritual authenticity, and the soul's transcendental experiences, underscoring a shared narrative across these diverse cultural backdrops. The narrative of Mansûr al-Hallâj, a Persian mystic executed for his beliefs, exemplifies the extreme consequences faced by such profound thinkers, illustrating how deep spiritual commitment could lead to both profound admiration and severe persecution. Moreover, this analysis considers how these mystics were received within their societies—some were hailed as pioneers of thought, while others were condemned and executed as heretics by prevailing religious authorities. This contrast provides deeper insight into the complex dynamics

between individual mystics and the broader societal and religious structures that either embraced or rejected their unconventional ideas. By providing a detailed comparative analysis, the study aims to enrich our understanding of mysticism as a bridge linking personal religious experience with the wider theological debates of the times. It contributes to a greater appreciation of the role of mystics in shaping religious thought across different historical and cultural contexts. This enriched narrative not only deepens our historical understanding of mystical traditions but also highlights the enduring dialogue between personal spiritual journeys and established religious doctrines.

KEYWORDS: Mysticism, mystics, Sufis, the Ultimate, the Beguines

RÉSUMÉ : Cette étude propose une comparaison du mysticisme tel qu'il a été pratiqué par des maîtres spirituels européens au XIV^e siècle et des Sufis de Sumatra aux XVI^e et XVII^e siècles, révélant ainsi des similitudes étonnantes interculturelles dans leur quête spirituelle, en s'isolant de l'effervescence urbaine. Ces mystiques, bien que séparés par la géographie et l'histoire, se sont impliqués à fond dans une métaphysique religieuse, s'exprimant avec passion par des sermons, des essais littéraires et des poèmes. Un point central de leurs écrits a été la relation entre l'individu et son créateur en insistant sur le rôle crucial de l'âme dans la recherche d'un épanouissement spirituel. L'étude met en lumière comment ces mystiques à la fois de l'Orient et de l'Occident se sont intéressés à des sujets existentiels communs et ont adopté les mêmes méthodes de réflexion qui prouvent une quête universelle de compréhension de l'essence divine. Les thèmes fréquents tels que la nature de l'amour divin, la poursuite de l'authenticité spirituelle et les expériences transcendantales de l'âme soulignent un discours partagé entre les différents milieux culturels. Les propos de Mansûr al-Hallâj, un mystique persan exécuté pour ses croyances, sont un exemple des conséquences extrêmes auxquelles ont dû faire face ces grands penseurs, montrant ainsi comment leur profond engagement spirituel pouvait engendrer une grande admiration et aussi une persécution cruelle. En outre, l'analyse montre aussi quelle a été la réception de ces mystiques dans leurs sociétés respectives, certains ont été considérés comme des pionniers dans la réflexion, tandis que d'autres ont été condamnés et même exécutés en tant qu'hérétiques par les autorités religieuses de leur époque. Ce contraste manifeste une grande compréhension de la dynamique entre les mystiques, la société de l'époque en général et les autorités religieuses qui acceptaient ou rejetaient leurs idées

si nouvelles. En offrant une analyse comparative détaillée, cet article a pour objectif d'élargir notre connaissance du mysticisme en bâtissant un pont entre l'expérience religieuse personnelle et les débats théologiques de l'époque. Il contribue à une meilleure compréhension du rôle joué par les mystiques dans les différents contextes historiques et culturels. Ce nouveau discours enrichit notre compréhension historique des traditions mystiques et souligne le dialogue permanent entre les itinéraires spirituels personnels et les doctrines religieuses établies.

MOTS-CLES : La mystique, les mystiques, les Soufis, l'Ultime, les Béguines

1. Introduction

How can a religious individual live his or her faith in our present societies in which religion tends to take a back seat, at least in many parts of the world? Such a question may seem incongruous as there seems to be no statistics showing such results. Moreover, in some other parts of the world religious considerations seem to prevail at the expense of mundane activities. Yet we feel it is worth considering such individuals and wonder whether they can find solace in their religious quests. Among the thousands of different ways to find happiness in one's religion, there is one which is not often talked about. It is mysticism.

We first have to raise such a question: Why is it so? Is it because such a religious approach is rather vague or even mysterious? In fact, it is no coincidence that mysticism and mystery share more or less the same etymology as both terms come from the same Greek root word.¹

The second point we would like to state is that mysticism has both a very long history and a rather wide geographical expanse as we find such movements in most major religions of the world. It has been indicated that mysticism appears in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For instance, a mystic approach has been found in the early Christian theologians called Gnostics in the Roman empire around the 2nd and the 3rd

1 Mystery comes from the Greek term μυστήριον (mysterion) while mysticism is coined after μυστικός (mystikos). See Keller (1996, p. 11).

centuries.² Much later in Islam, mystics, also called Sufis,³ such as Ibn Arabi and Rumi lived in the 12nd and 13rd centuries.⁴ Even if those theologians have long left this world, they are still remembered from time to time. For instance, an article was published for the general public in France last year (Pierre-Magnani, 2023).

The third point is that almost immediately after a new religion appears, mystics seem to come forward and express their views on such a new faith. Could we say that there is no religion without mystics? It would involve a longer study which is beyond the scope of our present article. However, the topic is indeed worth delving into; therefore, we have selected a few mystics in two different religions and two completely different worlds so we can neither indicate nor prove that there is an obvious influence or link between the former (European mystics) and the latter (Sumatra mystics). Yet influences did occur. For instance, Western scholars, among them Abelard in the 12th century, have benefitted from several Muslim theologians such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (980-1036), Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (1126-1198). One Sumatran Sufi we are going to consider later on, Hamzah Fansûri (16th-17th centuries) may have borrowed ideas from famous Sufis such as Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) or from al-Ghazali (1058-1111)⁵ or even from Djalâl ad-Dîn Rûmi (1207-1273)⁶.

After having stated that mystics have a long history, that such a trend is worldwide, that it can be noticed in many religions, we should try to find out what is precisely mysticism. According to several specialists, among them Carl-A Keller who has compiled a very clear account of such a movement in several religions, mysticism can be split into two aspects: the experience lived by the individual as well as the interpretation, the explanation of such a phenomenon (Keller, 1996, p. 12).

Other scholars have come up with different types of definition of

2 Many early Christian theologians can be included in the mystic movement such as Saint Augustin, Saint Jean de la Croix, Sainte Thérèse d'Avila etc.

3 The term *sufi*, like mysticism, is shrouded in mystery; does it come from *suf*, which means wool, as some people used to wear woolen garments in the Middle East?

4 Other Sufis who could be mentioned are Al Junayd who lived in Baghdad in the 10th century and Al-Ghazali in the 11st and 12nd centuries.

5 Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) wrote *Tarjuman al-'aswaq* [The interpreter of desires] and al Ghazali is the author of *Kitab kasr al-shahwatayn* [Self-control of two desires]. The French translation of such a book has been republished in 2012 by Bouraq in Paris under the title *Maitrise des deux désirs*.

6 His name is in fact Mohammad Balkhi, but he is known as Rûmi. He is still revered. See Pierre-Magnani (2023).

mysticism such as “a wisdom which leads to happiness in this world and the next through divine knowledge” (Ībish & Marculescu, 1978, p. 212). We are going to see later that wisdom indeed plays an important part in mysticism. Another definition is offered by Michel Cornuz when he states that mysticism is “a personal search to be united with God through an approach of inner detachment” (Cornuz, 2003, p. 14). Another attempt at giving a clear definition of mysticism has been made by Mohd Mokhtar Shafii who wrote: “*Tasawūf*, yang merupakan bahagian yang paling dalam dari *dimension* yang batin kepada wahyu keislaman, adalah merupakan cara yang sebaik-baiknya bagi mengrelisasi *tawhīd*.”⁷ An other definition of Sufism can be found in Ustaz Muhadir Haji Sol: “Ilmu Tasawuf ialah suatu ilmu untuk sampai kepada Allah dengan menyucikan batin daripada sifat-sifat mazmunah”⁸ (Ustaz Muhadir Haji, 2024, p. 120).

We can observe that most definitions of the concept of mysticism or Sufism revolve around the special link the faithful has with God and that the aspect of purification is necessary to achieve such a lofty goal.

It may seem strange to try to compare mystics who lived in Europe in the Middle Ages to mystics who lived in Asia. We may wonder whether such a choice is fruitful. Yet it is, as when studying these two types of theologians we came to realize that they do have quite a few features in common. Both paid attention to several similar topics, as will be discussed below.

2. Mystic Rituals

The mystics, whether in Europe or in Asia, tend to follow special rituals such as prayers, psalmody, hymns—for instance *dhikr* for the Sufis, which could lead by its numerous repetitions to reach a kind of ecstasy when practiced to the extreme—and silence which was often observed among Western mystics.⁹ Often mystics paid attention to their appearance. For instance, the Beguines used to wear special clothes and headscarves to distinguish themselves from other women of their time. Meals were also considered important. Eckhart

7 “Mysticism, which represents the most inner part of the intimate of the Islamic revelation, consists in implementing in the best way as possible the unicity of God”.

8 “The mystic science is a science to reach Allah in purifying the mind from condemned elements”.

9 For Eckhart, praying is “an intellectual elevation towards God” in Sermon 19 (Eckhart, 2009, p. 208).

considers the evening meal special as it happens at the end of a day before the faithful go to sleep.¹⁰ We have to recognize that mystic rituals are not as important as in other branches or trends in Islam. What we are going to consider right now is the implications of the itinerary which the mystic has chosen to take in order to express his faith.

3. A Mystical Journey

Usually, the mystics do not live a static life but they often, wherever they are and whatever faith they hold, embark on a spiritual journey in order to reach or to be close to the Ultimate whatever denomination it is given. Such a long, hard and tortuous way requires both going through a series of stages as well as accomplishing several rituals along the way. Among the rituals the mystic has to perform are praying and singing. A famous song performed by the Sufis is *Dhikr*, a repetitive form of singing. Such hymns are still heard in several parts of the Muslim world, for instance in Pakistan (Mortaigne, 2009).

As a matter of fact, such an epic journey starts with the realization that life goes beyond the simple framework in which we live, but takes on a bold approach towards the Ultimate and at times towards ecstasy.¹¹ Therefore the mystic has to leave the emptiness of his present life in order to get closer to the transcendent, the absolute, the Ultimate. The mystic's life has to drastically change to achieve that high goal. It is a new and complete involvement. Of course, the Ultimate cannot be described in our languages. It seems that here is an obvious difference between Christian and Muslim mystics in this respect as the former believe that God cannot be named or described while the latter indicate that God has 99 names (99 Names of Allah, 2024). Yet, if we care to look into that matter, it seems that the difference is not so wide. If the Muslims state that Allah has 99 names this shows that Allah has so many names since none of them can be considered as satisfactory by itself. In other words, the two religions are not too far apart in that respect.

Regarding the aspect of ecstasy, we can mention the famous whirling

¹⁰ In Sermon 20a (Eckhart, 2009, p. 211).

¹¹ This stage has often led mystics into trouble as traditional Muslims have criticized such an attitude, as it was against orthodox Islam.

dervishes from Türkiye.¹² This phenomenon has been studied by Turkish writer Nedim Gürsel (2010), among other scholars. How to reach such a goal? The mystic has to strive to renounce all previous life practices in order to be purified. “Mysticism strives for to reach the extinction of a life full of emotions and willingness” (Küng, 1981, p. 699). Thus, when he embarks on such a spiritual journey, the mystic has to deprive himself of all worldly goods, to be detached from them and to be ready to be purified in order to be finally closer to the Ultimate. Such a stage can be divided into three steps: purification, illumination, and union according to Meister Eckart, the famous Rhineland mystic (Ancelet-Hustache, 2000, p. 47).

If the mystic does renounce worldly goods and the usual way of life, if he does try to forget all what he has learnt and acquired before, this does not mean that his mind is empty as imagination takes over. This is explained by Carl-A Keller: “The mystical project requires to resort to imagination. Imagination is necessary to conceive superior worlds, intermediary spaces which guarantee the transition from the phenomenal world to the ultimate Reality, ascension has also to be imagined to see the different stages, the dangers which may befall on the traveler” (Keller, 1996, p. 157).

In his journey, the mystic, especially the Muslim, is not completely alone. Often, he chooses to get close to or to follow the steps of a sheikh, a master he can trust and learn from. This feature has been shown by Denys Lombard in a paper he delivered at a colloquium titled: “*Tarekat* and Enterprise in Sumatra: the Example of Sheikh Abdul Wahab Rokan (c. 1830-1926)” (Lombard, 1990). The importance played by the Sheikh has been noticed by several scholars. For instance, Jason Dean who is attached to the Faculty of Protestant Ethics in Strasbourg in France insists on the relation between the master and his disciple (Dean, 2007). Besides the master, or rather the sheikh for Muslims mystics, the individual is not alone in his quest for reaching or getting closer to the Ultimate as he usually joins a group of fellow mystics, a kind of brotherhood. As a matter of fact, we find several such brotherhoods which gave support and help both on the spiritual and material levels to the mystics. Several of them are famous and are still present for instance in Indonesia. We can name the Ahmadiyya, Qadiriyya, Naqshbandi, the

12 We follow the new toponym coined by the Turkish authorities who decided that the spelling Türkiye was better than the name of a bird, to avoid confusion.

Chattriya.¹³ Transcribing Muslim names from Arabic to Latin-based alphabet languages can be very confusing as several spellings can appear. For instance, should we use the term Chattriya or Shattariyah?¹⁴ So Islamic spelling is at times confusing and anthroponyms can even vary. For instance, in our study should we use the spelling Shamsuddin Pasai or Shamsuddin al-Sumatrani?¹⁵ Christian mystics also took part in some kind of groupings. For example, Meister Eckhart was for a time a member of such a group in his native Thüringen in Germany.

When the Sufi as a member of the congregation has chosen a Sheikh to follow his footsteps and to be guided by him, one of the very first acts he has to perform, is to cleanse himself and renounce all worldly goods and practices. To abandon such goods and habits can be considered as a kind of purification required to be a real Sufi. Actually, such a process is quite drastic as even the knowledge the Sufi had acquired before engaging in such a spiritual journey has to be discarded and forgotten. He has to suppress all previous knowledge (Keller, 1996, p. 186). The Sufi receives the command to avoid all objects which are described by their qualities and qualifications (Keller, 1996, p. 187). In forgoing all previous life stages and experiences and giving up all common knowledge, the mystic is encouraged to let loose his imagination. However, such a journey does not lead to a complete ascetism in a remote place far away from the society the Sufi lives in. In the Islamic religion there seems to be no isolated monasteries such as in Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. Muslims are apparently not encouraged to leave their brothers. This is also quite clear in the fact that mosques are most of the

13 For instance, this *tarekat* [brotherhood] has been studied by Oman Faturahman.

14 As in the title of the book by Faturahman. Actually, transcribing Arabic names and words can be a real headache as there is no common spelling. In 1993, in a seminar held at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia we suggested coining a common transcription for Arabic terms into Western languages. We explained that the Chinese language could do it with its Hanyu Pinyin for millions of Chinese speakers and readers, so the Muslim world could also do it. But our fellow colleagues argued that religious changes were very sensitive and should not be taken lightly. So the status quo remains. Yet to us it would be so much easier if a common spelling was accepted for all Arabic transliterations into Latin scripts. Thus we would not have three ways of writing the legal term الشريعة (sharia) in the UK, syariah in Malaysia, Charia in France, etc. The paper we presented in Yogyakarta at that symposium, was entitled 'Laras agama Islam' (Islamic Language Register) and was included in the proceedings *Simpodium ilmu-Ilmu Humaniora*, published by that university (Metzger, 1996, pp. 57-59).

15 The two names concern the same person. We do know that quite often Muslim names are followed by the place they live in. So in our present case, both are accurate as the Sufi lived in the town of Aceh which is located on the island of Sumatra.

time in a village, town or city and not built away on a hill, mountain or in a forest. Hadewijch d'Anvers, a member of the Beguine movement—which we are going to describe later on—has a very clear point of view regarding knowledge: “If you happen to be short of knowledge, seek what you are looking for within yourself in your simplicity” (Hadewijch d'Anvers, 1954, p. 177).

Another important attitude of the mystics is the contemplative aspect. It is like a “return to what preexists, what we were earlier on in all eternity and in what we have always been in the Verb” (Hadewijch d'Anvers, 1954, pp. 27-28).

This is also done by the European mystic who often started his studies in a monastery but very quickly realized that he had to leave the walls of such an institution in order to start his own spiritual journey. Martin Luther (1483-1546) left the Erfurt convent to be on his own and free from special schools of thinking.

The Christian mystic also starts a journey which can have three stages such as first a purification, then the mystic experiences illumination and the last stage is a kind of union with the Ultimate (Ancelet-Hustache, 2000, p. 47).

4. Relation with the Maker

Another important feature of the mystic is his or her links with the Ultimate, God, or one's Maker. In Islam, “the deity cannot be apprehended but can be discovered as the deity is turned towards the world”¹⁶ (Keller, 1996, p. 151). For most mystics, the connection between him or her and the Maker is of the utmost importance. According to Marguerite Porète, “the main question concerns love, because love is God and God is love” (Porète, 2011, p. 83). “Man has always to bear in mind God in his spirit, intention and love”. Such is Eckhart's point of view according to Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache (Ancelet-Hustache, 2000, p. 67). In fact, “God is within his creation” (Ancelet-Hustache, 2000, p. 46). Eckhart continues in indicating that “Man only requires what God is and his willingness” (Sermon 12; Eckhart, 2009, p. 159).

“According to Hamzah Fansûri, following Ibnu'l-Arabi, things exist as ideas in the Mind of God in the form of potentialities, lying dormant, as

16 In the original French the quotation is as follows: “la divinité inconnaissable est connue par son côté qui est tourné vers le monde.”

it were, in readiness to leap into life and fulfil the Divine Command” (Al-Attas, 1970, p. 78). Therefore, the spirit is very important to the mystics, both in Europe and in Asia. Later on, in the same introduction to Hamzah Fansûri’s texts, Syed Muhamad Naquib al-Attas adds that in Malay there are also two terms that are used for spirit: *nyawa* and *roh* (Al-Attas, 1970, p. 78). Furthermore according to Al-Attas, Hamzah Fansûri makes a distinction between the spirit and the soul, the latter term is *nafs* in Malay (Al-Attas, 1970, p. 86). The distinction appears clearer when Hamzah Fansûri makes use of symbols to explain the meaning of the concepts he puts forward. So, the *nyawa* or *roh* is represented by the *Unggas Pingai* [Luminous Bird] while the *nafs* [soul] takes the form of *Ikan Tunggal* [Unique Fish] (Al-Attas, 1970, p. 89). Then Hamzah Fansûri explains that “God as the Absolute realizes Himself in Man whom He created in His own image” (Al-Attas, 1970, p. 92). Such a statement immediately reminds us of the similar Bible verse.¹⁷ We have to mention that the soul is also a character in Marguerite Porète’s famous text.¹⁸ Finally, according to Ancelet-Hustache, “All the mystics have talked about the experience of the soul abducted into God” (Ancelet-Hustache, 2000, p. 48).

5. Female Mystics, the Beguine Movement

Traditionally deities, prophets, theologians and even exegetes and commentators in the five widespread religions we mentioned earlier have been men. Of course, this does not mean that female individuals did not play an important part in those religions. Although they tended to play second fiddle in the past, as research progresses, we come to realize that many women should be given due respect in our understanding of religions as well as consideration in their theological approaches.

One such group of women are the Beguine congregation which emerged in Western Europe in the Middle Ages. Such a phenomenon is rather interesting for several reasons. First a group of women decided to live apart to set up special communities. But such an institution was not built in a remote and isolated place but in the midst of town. So these women who wanted to

17 “So God created man in his own image” (*The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments*, 1985, Genesis 1:27).

18 Along with Reason, Love, Virtues, Truth, etc. in Porète (2011).

live on their own chose to remain in towns so they could come in and out of their common houses and benefit from all town activities and amenities. They were neither spouses, nor nuns. But they were often called in Latin *mulieres religiosae* [religious women]. A lot of mysteries surround such a phenomenon. Their names are often obscure or even unknown. At times we do not know when they were born. But most of the time we are told when they passed away. One reason given for such a mystery is that they preferred to remain discreet in order not to be criticized or condemned by the established church of the period. When their movement appeared, they were scorned by many male commentators, for instance the poet Rutebeuf (1245-1285).¹⁹ The origin of their name is also unclear. Does it come from the Canon Lambert Le Bègue who lived in Liège (present Belgium) in the 12th century and who wrote down their first rule, or does it come from the Old Dutch “beggan” which means to recite or to chant, one of their favored activities?

The Beguine movement experienced three distinct periods. It emerged in the 12th century, had its golden era in the 17th and enjoyed a renewal in the 19th century (Ayers, 2022). Actually, for a long period, this movement was not highly regarded and often forgotten or considered minor. Yet after some recent research it has been found out that the Beguine way of life was indeed somewhat important in the spiritual development in the Middle Ages.²⁰

The pioneer of the movement seems to be Marie d’Oignies (1177-1213).²¹ Several other female mystics followed in her footsteps in the 13th century such as Elisabeth de Hongrie, Hadewijch d’Anvers, Marguerite Porète, etc. We may ask why such a movement appeared at that time. As a matter of fact, as economic development occurred, some intellectuals came to realize that other pursuits needed to be embarked upon. What is also worth noticing is that such a movement came about in a rather precise region of Western Europe.

19 “If a beguine gets married, it is her way of life, her intention, her job...” (Larousse, 2022).

20 In the summer of 2022, the French daily *Le Monde* published six full-page articles on the Beguine movement from July 26th to July 31st.

21 As in the case of other famous figures of the past, the name of this Beguine is followed by the place she lived, hence the name Marie d’Oignies (Marie coming from Oignies). We have noticed the same practice for the Sumatran Sufis. Thus, Hamzah Fansûri, hailed from Fansur (at times also called Barus) a small harbor on the North-Western coast of Sumatra. Abdul Rauf Singkel (1615-1693) was born in Singkel, Nurruddin ar-Raniri was born in Ranir, India and Shamsuddin Pasai, was born in Pasai in Sumatra. At present often the name of Muslim leaders are followed by the place they were born. For instance, the former president of Iraq was called Saddam Hussein al-Tikriti as he hailed from the town of Tikrit.

We find Beguines and their cloisters only in a few countries such as present-day Belgium, Western Germany, the Netherlands and Northern France. Two fairly large Beguine cloisters were set up in Ghent and Brussels in present Belgium but they were later destroyed. Another reason for the appearance of such a movement was that these women were not satisfied being in convents and controlled by men; they wanted to be able to do something worthwhile, to engage in several different activities, which we are going to see later on. So they set up their common lodgings in search of independence.

Although the sources we have are unfortunately are rather scarce and too far apart, as many documents about the Beguines and many texts that they themselves have written have disappeared probably because many traditional Christians could not accept their way of life and their ideas, we can pinpoint a few points: first, they were quite active. Some were involved in caring for the sick, and some took part in the textile industry which emerged at that time, but most of them were engaged in religious matters. So they prayed, discussed religious texts, sang, and wrote. It has been indicated that the Beguines wrote “among the best pages of mystic literature” (Larousse, 2022). Among the most intriguing pieces written by such female mystics, we can mention Marguerite Porète’s most famous book written first in German, *Der Spiegel der einfachen Seelen* and later translated into French *Le miroir des âmes simples et anéanties* [The mirror of simple and wiped-out souls]. This work is unique in a sense that it consists of a discussion between several characters such as Reason, Love, Soul, and so on²². Quite a few statements made by the Beguine are really special. For instance, she wrote that the Beguine “does not long for masses, sermons, fasting or preaches... She does not beg because she needs nothing outside herself” (Porète, 2011, p. 76).

As the Beguine movement appeared as a threat to the established order, the Beguines were criticized because they took over the care of the sick and the dying, and because of their way of life, they were declared heretic. For Marguerite Porète, the soul is destroyed or even wiped out as there is no longer a political or religious hierarchy. Church authorities saw this as preposterous. She was first criticized, put to trial, and finally burnt alive in the Grève Square

22 For two reasons we can compare the approach to that of Plato. First, all of Plato’s works are in the form of dialogues, discussions between several individuals. Moreover, Plato introduced us to the Cave Myth which can be associated with the image of the mirror of Marguerite Porète. We thus do not see things as they are but through a kind of divider. In Plato’s ideas we only see shadows and in Marguerite Porète’s book, only reflections.

in Paris in 1310.²³

6. How Have Mystics Been Perceived?

Leaving mainstream religion was first noticed, sometimes approved, often criticized, or even strongly opposed. Often in religious matters, when new ideas or interpretations are put forward, it takes a long time for the elders and the followers to accept such new trends, approaches, practices and so on. Moreover, even between mystics, disagreements occurred and new mystics often opposed what their predecessors had expressed. For instance, we can mention both Muslim and Christian mystics who apparently did not fall into the traditional mold of religious figures. At times critics could even be cruel as quite a few religious figures—as well as political opponents—have been put to trial and often executed. We can of course mention the famous mystic Husayn ibn Mansûr, named al-Hallâj (the man of secrets or the man of mysteries) who was put in jail for eight years and tortured before being crucified in Baghdad on 26 March 922 (Ayouch, 2010). He was accused of being an agitator and believing too much in miracles. As for the Beguines, who were considered heretic, we can mention Lutgarde de Trèves, who was burnt alive in 1231, Aleydis Van Kamerijk (Cambrai) in 1236, and Marguerite Porète who endured the same fate and was burnt alive in Place de Grève in Paris, on 1 June 1310. Quite a few years later, both al-Hallâj and Marguerite Porète were rehabilitated. Both are now considered leaders in their quest for truth.²⁴ In Sumatra, confrontation of different points of view among Sufis appeared when Nuruddin ar-Raniri (d. 1658) criticized a previous Sufi, Shamsuddin al-Sumatrani (d.1630) who was appreciated during the reign of the former sultan, Iskandar Muda (c.1583-1636). Nuruddin ar-Raniri lived and worked in Aceh under the protection and the patronage of Iskandar Muda's successor, Iskandar Thani (1610-1641). Another famous Sufi, Hamzah Fansûri (1550-c.1610), had his books burnt in Aceh by the sultan on the advice of Nuruddin ar-Raniri (Reid, 2015, p. 393). The confrontation between Sufis went even a

23 A special issue (No. 297) has been published about the Beguine Movement (see <http://lumiere-et-vie.fr/n297-les-beguines/#>).

24 The islamologue Louis Massignon wrote a very comprehensive book on al-Hallâj. The original is in French and it has been subsequently translated into Spanish, Arabic, and Turkish (See Massignon (1975)).

step higher than just quarrelling; some followers of Shamsuddin al-Sumatrani were executed. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas seems to be biased as he favors Hamzah Fansûri and discriminates against one of his successors Nuruddin ar-Raniri. According to him, the latter did not understand Hamzah Fansûri's mystic concepts, which is why Nuruddin ar-Raniri criticizes his predecessor, Hamzah Fansûri. Another explanation about the differences of points of view between these two prominent Sufis has been put forward by Anthony Reid who reminds us that the situation had changed between Hamzah Fansûri's time and sultan (Iskandar Muda) and Nuruddin ar-Raniri who was invited by the new sultan, Iskandar Thani. The first sultan was rather conservative and Aceh was not yet the important harbor it became under Iskandar Thani (Reid, 2015, pp. 393-394).

7. Mystic Centers in the Past

One interesting feature associated with mystics is the fact that often they were invited, encouraged, appreciated by the local political leaders of a certain place. Indeed it has been noticed in history that often emperors, kings, queens, princes invited writers, academics, artists, and scientists to their court in order for them to be surrounded by such famous personalities so that their tenure of power would be highly regarded by all and sundry. This is a world phenomenon which happened in the past and which can still be observed in our present time.²⁵ For instance, the four main Sumatran Sufis who lived in the 16th and 17th centuries in Aceh, that is in Northeast Sumatra, were invited by two sultans who held power, first Iskandar Muda (c. 1580-1636) and his nephew Iskandar Thani (1610-1641). In Europe, in the Middle Ages, Paris played an important part in attracting religious figures in its midst. For instance, Eckhart visited that city on several occasions as the place was known then for its fierce theological disputes and exchanges.

Under such protection and patronage, the Sufis were free to express themselves in different forms. Therefore, they wrote treatises, poems, sermons

25 For instance, Elizabeth I welcomed Shakespeare, Louis XIV of France had quite a few writers and artists at Versailles while the Russians Tsars such as Peter the Great or Catherine the Great also invited prominent literary figures to spend time at their courts.

and so on. For instance, Meister Eckhart wrote 90 sermons.²⁶ The Sumatran Sufis produced both treatises and long poems while one of the Beguines, Margerite Porète, communicated her views in the form of dialogues²⁷. But such dialogues did not take place between real figures but between several concepts such as reason, love, soul, etc. (Porète, 2011). What is also noteworthy is the language chosen by the mystics. As far as the Beguines are concerned, they wrote their texts in vernacular languages to reach out to the local communities and not in Latin which prevailed at that time in religious and intellectual circles. This became a reason for the traditional church leaders to criticize them. So Marguerite Porète wrote in Picard, a dialect used in Northern France, Hadewijch wrote in Flemish, while Philippa Porcelet used the Provence dialect.

Apart from rigorous treatises and enchanting poems, mystics were famous for condensing their thoughts into aphorisms. Several are quite clear and have kept their flavor. Earlier mystics could produce such short advices to their followers. For instance, Bertrand Badie in a recent book gives an aphorism of Farid ed Din Attâr (1145-c.1200): “Rien n’est jamais fermé, sinon tes propres yeux”²⁸ (Badie, 2022, p. 176). As a matter of fact, mysticism and Sufism are renowned for their maxims, and there are several compilations of such thoughts. For instance, *La Sagesse du soufisme* [Sufi wisdom] contains some of the most appreciated Sufi ideas. Just two of them can prove our point: “If a disciple stops practicing courteousness, he will fall back to where he came from” (Lewisohn, 2002, p. 54). Another maxim by a famous Sufi is as follows: “I much prefer to be associated with depraved and corrupt individuals than with some others with bad temper who sing the Quran” (Lewisohn, 2002, p. 107). For her part, Hadewijch d’Anvers wrote in a poem: “ivre du vin que je n’ai pas bu” [Drunk from the wine I have not touched] (Hadewijch d’Anvers, 1954).

Regarding Eckhart, we have to state that he wrote in Latin which was the intellectual language used in Europe at that time. As for the Sumatran Sufis, as they were invited successively by two sultans, they decided to write in the

26 According to the compilation of Gwendoline Jarczyk and Pierre-Jean Labarrière (Eckhart, 2009).

27 For instance, the Sumatran Sufi Hamzah Fansûri wrote the poems *Syair Bahr an-Nisa* [Poem of the sea of women] which is explained by Vladimir Braginsky in his article (Braginsky, 2004).

28 “Nothing is definitely closed except your own eyes.”

local language which was Malay.²⁹

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, a Malaysian scholar noticed that place names in Aceh (North-East Sumatra) often had a Sufi flavor. In his book on Hamzah Fansûri, he mentions *Dâru'l-Dunyâ* [abode of the world] for the palace of the sultan, *Dâru'l-Kamal* [abode of perfection] for another palace, *Dâru'l Safâ* [abode of purity] for another important landmark in Aceh (Al-Attas, 1970, p. 17).

Another interesting point is that Sufis in Asia as well as mystics in Europe knew several languages. For instance, Hamzah Fansûri could express himself in Arabic, Malay and Persian. This helped him in his journeys in the Middle East. Yet he chose to write in Malay as he was a religious adviser to the sultan in Aceh. We have seen that Western mystics usually wrote their treatises in Latin although the Beguines chose the vernacular language, probably in order to be understood by the ordinary people they were living with.

8. Conclusion

Is mysticism something left to the past? It seems the opposite, as Sufism seems quite alive in many parts of the Muslim world as well as mysticism in the Western world. Firstly, we can notice that a number of studies have been made concerning past mystics both in the West and in the East. To name a few, several articles on Sufi *tarekat* [brotherhoods] have been published recently which have been mentioned in our bibliography. But we should also consider that mysticism is not only a phenomenon of the past but that such a movement can still be observed. This does indicate that mystics are still at work to explain their thoughts. For instance, the Indonesian poet, Amir Hamzah (1911-1946) has been the object of several studies such as by the Malaysian professor Md Salleh Yaapar as well as the famous Indonesian female writer, Nh. Dini (1936-2018)³⁰. As we have seen earlier, mystics often express themselves through poems, both in the past as in our present time.

But mystics do not remain alone, far away from society. For instance,

29 A few centuries before they came to Aceh, another town attracted writers, scientists and artists; it was Baghdad under Abbasid rule (750-1258).

30 Amir Hamzah has been called "the king of poets of the new writers" by the famous Indonesian scholar, H.B. Jassin (Teeuw, 1970, p. 88).

they can gather in festivals. That is what happened in Mostaganem in Algeria in 2009: “Le voyage du petit Coran. Fin juillet, à Mostaganem, en Algérie, des soufis venus du monde entier se sont retrouvés : le soufisme, cette pratique tolérante de l’islam, faisait enfin entendre sa différence face aux fanatiques du djihad. Depuis Yogyakarta, en Indonésie, un maître Sufi a apporté en présent un séculaire Coran en miniature...”³¹ One of the highlights of that festival was the evening performance of musical groups. An interesting feature of Sufism is its humor. While quite often religious practices are sober, repetitive and very traditional, mystics have sometimes added a touch of humor.³²

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31 “The Journey of a small Quran. At the end of July, in Algeria, Sufis from all over the world gathered: Sufism, a tolerant and mystic practice of Islam made itself heard against jihad fanatics. From Yogyakarta, in Indonesia, a Sufi master brought as a present a century-old Quran in miniature...” (Inandiak, 2009).

32 For instance, an Algerian guide advised foreign Sufis to choose a Sufi taxi driver. When he was asked how to identify such a special driver, he replied: if you see a taxi with the windows completely open, with no air-conditioning and a driver singing at the top of his voice, you can be certain that he is a Sufi follower.

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Professional Profile

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