



University of Tehran Press

Classical and Contemporary Islamic Studies (CCIS)

Online ISSN: 3060-7337

Home Page: <https://jcis.ut.ac.ir>

Reassessing Sufi Quranic Exegesis: A Methodological Critique of Coppens' Frameworks with an Integrated Analytical Model

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ARTICLE INFO

Article type:
Research Article

Article History:

Received: 23 April 2025
Revised: 15 May 2025
Accepted: 18 May 2025
Published Online: 11 June 2025

Keywords:

Sufi interpretations,
Peter Coppens,
Crossing the boundary,
Center and periphery,
Integrated Sufi Exegesis Model,
Sufism.

ABSTRACT

This study critically evaluates Peter Coppens' analytical frameworks for Sufi Quranic exegesis, identifying their limitations and introducing the Integrated Sufi Exegesis Model (ISEM) to address these shortcomings. While innovative, Coppens' models of "crossing the boundary" and "center and periphery" are argued to rely on non-indigenous theories, which oversimplify the rich conceptual and historical diversity of Sufi interpretations and neglect crucial discursive and institutional dynamics that shaped Sufi thought. To demonstrate these limitations, the article employs an interdisciplinary approach, combining critical textual analysis of primary sources, historical-social investigations, and social network mapping. New textual evidence from influential Sufi commentaries by al-Sulami, al-Qushayri, Maybudi, Ruzbihan Baqli, Tustari, Hujwiri, and Sarraj, alongside non-Sufi exegesis by al-Tabari, highlights conceptual diversity (e.g., annihilation, proximity, and unity of existence) and regional variations which characterized Sufi interpretive traditions (e.g., in centers such as Nishapur, Baghdad, and Andalusia). These critiques are further substantiated by historical sources, including *The History of Nishapur* and *The History of Baghdad*. The ISEM, applied through a detailed case study on al-Qushayri's *Lata'if al-Isharat*, integrates textual-historical, phenomenological, discursive, and social network analyses to offer a more context-sensitive framework. This model enhances the study of Sufi exegesis by prioritizing indigenous concepts and interdisciplinary methods.

Cite this article: Mostajaboldavti, A. (2025). Reassessing Sufi Quranic Exegesis: A Methodological Critique of Coppens' Frameworks with an Integrated Analytical Model. *Classical and Contemporary Islamic Studies (CCIS)*, 7 (2), 233-243. <http://doi.org/10.22059/jcis.2025.393977.1419>



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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22059/jcis.2025.393977.1419>

Publisher: University of Tehran Press.

Introduction

Sufi Quranic commentaries provide profound insights into the spiritual, eschatological, and social dimensions of medieval Islamic thought, necessitating analytical frameworks that capture their textual, historical, and cultural complexity. Peter Coppens' research study, *Seeing God in Sufi Qur'an Commentaries*, proposes two frameworks—"crossing the boundary" and "center and periphery"—to analyze Sufi exegesis from 950–1250 CE. However, these frameworks, rooted in Western theoretical constructs, may not fully accommodate the diversity of Sufi thought or its socio-historical contexts. This study introduces the Integrated Sufi Exegesis Model (ISEM), a comprehensive framework that integrates textual-historical, phenomenological, discursive, and social network analyses to reassess Coppens' approaches. The primary research questions guiding this analysis are: How do Coppens' frameworks limit the understanding of Sufi Quranic exegesis, and how does the ISEM overcome these constraints? Secondary questions include: What conceptual and historical nuances do Coppens' models overlook? How can indigenous Sufi concepts and interdisciplinary methods enrich exegesis studies? What evidence supports a revised approach to Sufi hermeneutics?

Coppens' framework of "crossing the boundary," inspired by Christian Lange's concept of a "thin boundary" between this world and the hereafter, posits that Sufis traverse this divide through mystical states such as unveiling and divine vision. His "center and periphery" model, drawn from Edward Shils' sociological theory, positions Sufis either within or against the dominant religious discourses of their time, particularly in Nishapur. While these models offer valuable perspectives, their reliance on non-indigenous theories risks oversimplifying the conceptual richness and institutional dynamics of Sufi exegesis. This article employs indigenous concepts (e.g., *fana*, *qurb*, *tajalli*), Talal Asad's discursive tradition, Walid Saleh's textual-historical method, and new evidence from commentators such as Tustari, Hujwiri, and Sarraj to critique Coppens' frameworks. The ISEM, demonstrated through a case study on al-Qushayri's *Lata'if al-Isharat*, provides a nuanced alternative that bridges textual analysis with socio-historical realities.

The article begins with a literature review of Sufi studies, followed by a detailed analysis of the frameworks of "crossing the boundary" and "center and periphery," supported by expanded textual and historical evidence. It then presents the ISEM as a transformative tool, illustrating its application through a case study and comparative analysis. The study concludes with implications for Sufi scholarship and recommendations for future research, advocating for context-sensitive, interdisciplinary approaches that prioritize Islamic intellectual traditions.

Coppens analyzes Sufi interpretations of the Quran during the early medieval Islamic period (950–1250 CE) (Coppens, 2018). Focusing on the vision of God as the central theme of Sufi eschatology, he examines significant commentaries such as al-Sulami's *Haqa'iq al-Tafsir*, al-Qushayri's *Lata'if al-Isharat*, Maybudi's *Kashf al-Asrar*, and Ruzbihan Baqli's *'Ara'is al-Bayan*. He introduces two novel frameworks: "crossing the boundary" to analyze the relationship between this world and the hereafter, and "center and periphery" to examine the position of Sufism within the religious tradition. These frameworks, through the analysis of Quranic verses (e.g., "And We said, 'O Adam, dwell, you and your wife, in Paradise'" [Qur'an 2:35–39]; "When Moses came to Our appointed time" [Qur'an 7:143]; "By the star when it descends" [Qur'an 53:1–18]), as well as through the employment of primary and secondary sources (e.g., Lange, 2015; Shils, 1961), and an emphasis on Nishapur as a hub of Sufi thought, have distinguished this work.

Coppens argues that Sufi commentaries are valuable not only for understanding the Quran but also for reconstructing the spiritual and eschatological imaginaries of medieval Sufis (Coppens, 2018). Focusing on Nishapur in the 4th and 5th centuries AH, which, due to the presence of scholars such as al-Qushayri and al-Sulami, was a center of religious discourse, he demonstrates that Sufis utilized Quranic exegesis to articulate the vision of God, divine proximity, and the relationship between this world and the hereafter. However, his frameworks, "crossing the boundary" (inspired by Lange, 2015) and "center and periphery" (inspired by Shils, 1961), encounter limitations due to their reliance on non-indigenous theories, oversimplification of conceptual and historical diversity, ambiguity in concepts, lack of evidence, and neglect of discursive and institutional dynamics. These shortcomings necessitate methodological critique as analytical methods influence the understanding of Islamic intellectual history.

Sufi commentaries require frameworks that encompass their textual, historical, and discursive diversity, are compatible with the medieval Islamic context, and avoid orientalist stereotypes (e.g., the views of Goldziher, 1970, and Massignon, 1997). This article, by reassessing Coppens' frameworks through the ISEM and integrating new textual and historical evidence, contributes to a more precise and contextually grounded analysis of Sufi exegesis, strengthening the connection between Sufi texts and their socio-cultural contexts.

Research Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to critically reassess Coppens' frameworks and propose the ISEM as a comprehensive alternative. Secondary objectives include identifying the conceptual, historical, and methodological limitations of Coppens' models, providing new textual and historical evidence (e.g., from studies conducted by Tustari, Hujwiri, Sarraj, and al-Tabari) to support this critique, demonstrating the ISEM's application through a case study, and advancing interdisciplinary methodologies in Sufi studies by prioritizing indigenous concepts and socio-historical contexts.

Methodology

This study employs the following combined methods: critical textual analysis of Coppens' work and Sufi commentaries (e.g., the works of al-Sulami and Ruzbihan); historical-social investigation with contemporary sources (al-Khatib, 1997; Shafiei Kadkani, 1990); theoretical evaluation with indigenous (e.g., Asad, 1986) and non-indigenous theories (e.g., Chittick, 1994), and interdisciplinary analysis (combining historical, literary, and anthropological methods). Regional comparison (Nishapur, Baghdad, Andalusia) as well as the use of primary (commentaries, epistles) and secondary sources (Lange, 2015; Saleh, 2004) enrich the analysis.

Literature Review

Studies of Sufism and Sufi Quranic commentaries have been prominent in Islamic studies since the late 19th century. Goldziher (1970) considered Sufism a marginal movement influenced by other religions (Christianity, Hinduism) and detached it from Islamic tradition. Massignon (1997) attributed the mystical experiences of al-Hallaj to Christian theology. These orientalist perspectives were critiqued by Schimmel (1975) who, through the analysis of the works of Rumi and Ruzbihan, demonstrated the continuity of Sufism with the Quran and hadith.

Chittick, using a phenomenological approach, examined concepts such as unity of existence and manifestation in Ibn al-'Arabi's works, considering the Quran as the framework for mystical experiences (Chittick, 1994). Lange proposed the concept of a "thin boundary" between this world and the hereafter but paid less attention to Quranic commentaries, influencing Coppens' work (Lange, 2015). Bowering (1980) demonstrated the role of Sufi commentaries (e.g., Tustari's exegesis) in articulating eschatological concepts.

Saleh (2004) suggested a textual-historical method for analyzing commentaries, which is useful for critiquing Coppens' generalizations. Sands (2006), by examining the commentaries of al-Qushayri and Ruzbihan, highlighted the importance of interpretive methods. Calder (2007) critiqued the oversimplification of Islamic texts by non-indigenous frameworks, and Asad (1986), using the concept of discursive tradition, offered an alternative to the "center and periphery" model. Safi (2006) analyzed the role of Sufi networks in Nishapur.

Despite these advances, methodological critique of Sufi commentaries, particularly with attention to textual and regional diversity, remains limited. This article, by introducing the ISEM and leveraging new evidence, fills this gap through offering a context-sensitive framework for Sufi exegesis.

The Concept of "Crossing the Boundary" and Its Critique

Elucidating the Concept of "Crossing the Boundary" in Coppens' View

Peter Coppens' framework of "crossing the boundary" seeks to illuminate the interplay between this world and the hereafter in Sufi Quranic exegesis, drawing on Christian Lange's notion of a "thin boundary" (Lange, 2015). Lange (2015) posited that Sufis perceived these realms as interconnected, traversable through mystical states such as unveiling and divine vision. Coppens adapts this concept to

Sufi commentaries, arguing that Nishapuri Sufis of the 4th and 5th centuries AH interpreted Quranic narratives to bridge this gap. His analysis focuses on three key Quranic concepts:

- Adam's Fall ("And We said, 'O Adam, dwell, you and your wife, in Paradise'" [Qur'ān 2:35–39]): Coppens views this as a transition from an eschatological to a worldly realm, traversable through spiritual practice (Coppens, 2018).
- Moses' Request for the Vision of God ("When Moses came to Our appointed time" [Qur'ān 7:143]): Coppens interprets this as a mystical encounter at the threshold of the divine realm (Coppens, 2018).
- The Prophet's Ascension ("By the star when it descends" [Qur'ān 53:1–18]): Coppens sees this as a paradigmatic crossing to the divine realm (Coppens, 2018).

Coppens argues that the vision of God serves as a bridge, supported by commentaries from al-Sulami, al-Qushayri, Maybudi, and Ruzbihan. However, the reliance of this framework on Lange's non-indigenous model and its limited engagement with diverse Sufi perspectives necessitate a critical reassessment through the ISEM.

Critique and Limitations

Coppens' framework of "crossing the boundary," while insightful, exhibits several methodological constraints that limit its applicability to Sufi exegesis:

- Dependence on Non-Indigenous Theory: The framework's foundation in the concept of "thin boundary," proposed by Lange and derived from non-exegetical texts, struggles to accommodate the conceptual diversity of Sufi commentaries. For instance, Ibn al-'Arabi's (2002) emphasis on the unity of existence negates the notion of a traversable boundary while al-Qushayri (2007) prioritizes heart-based proximity.
- Neglect of Regional Variations: Coppens' focus on Nishapur overlooks diverse Sufi traditions in Baghdad (e.g., Junayd's emphasis on self-discipline) and Andalusia (e.g., Ibn al-'Arif's intuitive mysticism). These variations challenge the framework's generalizability (Ibn al-'Arif, 2014; Junayd, 1987).
- Ambiguity in Defining "Bounda": The framework lacks clarity on whether the boundary is metaphysical, social, or institutional, undermining its analytical precision. Ruzbihan's (1995) view of divine manifestation in the heart dissolves such boundaries.
- Limited Use of Non-Exegetical Sources: Coppens underutilizes texts such as al-Sarraj's (1990) *al-Luma* or al-Qushayri's *Risala*, which emphasize internal spiritual experiences over boundary-crossing.
- Oversimplification of Conceptual Dynamics: The framework assumes a universal Sufi perception of distinct realms, ignoring perspectives such as Ibn al-'Arabi's (1999) unity of existence, which views the world as a divine manifestation.
- Insufficient Evidence: Coppens' generalizations rely heavily on Nishapuri texts, lacking broader textual support from other regions or periods.

Textual Evidence

To confirm the above limitations, textual evidence from Sufi commentaries is presented:

- Ruzbihan Baqli ("When Moses came to Our appointed time" [Qur'ān 7:143]): Ruzbihan (1995) considers the vision of God as an experience in the inner realm that requires no crossing of a boundary: "The vision of the Real lies in the mystic's heart, not in crossing from this world to the hereafter. The Real manifests in the mirror of the heart" (p. 146). This perspective emphasizes divine manifestation (*tajalli*), which breaks the dichotomy of this world and the hereafter, rendering Coppens' boundary-crossing metaphor inadequate.
- Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (Ascension, "By the star when it descends" [Qur'ān 53:1–18]): Al-Sulami (2001, p. 78) interprets the ascension as divine proximity, not crossing a boundary: "The Prophet, in the ascension, reached the station of proximity, not crossing a material or metaphysical boundary." This interpretation prioritizes continuity with God through *qurb*, challenging the assumption of a traversable boundary.

- Rashid al-Din Maybudi (Fall, “And We said, ‘O Adam, dwell, you and your wife, in Paradise’” [Qur’ān 2:35–39]): Maybudi (1992, p. 156) considers the fall as estrangement from divine proximity: “The fall was estrangement from proximity, which is compensated through practice and self-purification.” This view frames the fall as a spiritual state rather than a spatial transition, undermining Coppens’ framework.
- Ibn al-‘Arabi (Vision of God): Ibn al-‘Arabi (2002, p. 67) emphasizes unity of existence in *Fusus al-Hikam*: “The world is a manifestation of the Real, and there is no boundary between this world and the hereafter.” This concept of *wahdat al-wujud* negates the need for a boundary, directly contradicting Coppens’ model.
- ‘Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri (“When Moses came to Our appointed time” [Qur’ān 7:143]): Al-Qushayri (2007, p. 143) considers the vision of God as divine proximity: “The vision of God lies in the proximity of the heart, not in crossing a boundary.” This focus on *qurb* highlights an internal, heart-based experience that does not align with crossing a metaphysical divide.
- Sahl al-Tustari (Vision of God, Qur’ān 7:143): Tustari (as cited in Bowering, 1980, p. 34), in his *Tafsir al-Tustari*, states: “The heart of the believer is the locus of divine manifestation, where God is witnessed without crossing any boundary. This early Sufi perspective from Basra emphasizes internal divine presence, further illustrating the diversity of Sufi views that Coppens’ framework fails to capture.
- Al-Hujwiri (General Mystical Experience): In *Kashf al-Mahjub*, al-Hujwiri (1999, p. 56) asserts: “The Sufi path is bound to the heart’s purification, where the divine is experienced without traversing a boundary.” This non-exegetical source from Lahore reinforces the prevalence of internal mystical experiences over boundary-crossing metaphors.
- Al-Tabari (Qur’ān 7:143): In his *Jami’ al-Bayan*, al-Tabari (2001, p. 45) offers a literalist interpretation of Moses’ request for vision, stating: “Moses sought to see God but was overwhelmed by divine manifestation on the mountain.” This non-Sufi exegesis highlights the distinctiveness of Sufi interpretations, which Coppens’ framework generalizes without sufficient contrast.

These textual pieces of evidence demonstrate that the “crossing the boundary” framework fails to encompass the conceptual diversity (annihilation, proximity, manifestation, unity of existence) in Sufi commentaries. To further illustrate this diversity, Table 1 compares key concepts across selected commentaries:

Table 1. Comparison of Key Concepts in Sufi Commentaries Challenging the “Crossing the Boundary” Framework

| Commentator | Region | Key Concept | Interpretation of Qur’ān 7:143 | Challenge to Coppens’ Model |
|-----------------|-----------|---|--|----------------------------------|
| Al-Qushayri | Nishapur | Proximity (<i>qurb</i>) | Vision as heart-based proximity | No boundary-crossing required |
| Ruzbihan Baqli | Shiraz | Manifestation (<i>tajalli</i>) | Vision as divine unveiling | Boundary dissolved |
| Ibn al-‘Arabi | Andalusia | Unity of Existence (<i>wahdat al-wujud</i>) | World as divine manifestation | No distinct boundary |
| Sahl al-Tustari | Basra | Divine Presence | Heart as locus of divine manifestation | Internal experience, no boundary |
| Al-Hujwiri | Lahore | Heart’s Purification | Divine experience through purification | No boundary traversal |

Historical Evidence

Historical sources also confirm the limitations of Coppens’ framework:

- *Reports on the History of Isfahan* (Abu Nu’aym al-Isfahani): Abu Nu’aym (1997, p. 89) quotes Bayezid Bistami: “The hereafter lies in the mystic’s heart, not in a boundary that must be crossed.” This perspective emphasizes internal experience, aligning with the textual evidence of heart-based mysticism.
- *The History of Baghdad* (al-Khatib al-Baghdadi): Al-Khatib (1997, p. 123) quotes Junayd Baghdadi, stating that the hereafter lies in practice and self-discipline: “The mystic finds the hereafter in their heart.” This view prioritizes spiritual practice over spatial metaphors.

- *The History of Nishapur* (Abu ‘Abd Allah Shafiei Kadkani): Shafiei Kadkani (1990, p. 156) refers to the diversity of perspectives among Nishapuri Sufis, including al-Qushayri’s emphasis on proximity rather than crossing a boundary: “Al-Qushayri saw the vision of God in proximity.” This evidence underscores the regional variations that Coppens’ framework overlooks.

Proposed Improvements

To enhance the analysis of Sufi exegesis, the ISEM offers a robust alternative to Coppens’ “crossing the boundary” framework:

- Textual-Historical Analysis: Comparing commentaries across regions (e.g., Nishapur vs. Shiraz) can address Coppens’ generalizations.
- Indigenous Concepts: Concepts such as *fana*, *qurb*, and *tajalli* align with Sufi thought, offer a more context-sensitive approach (Ibn al-‘Arabi, 2002).
- Integration of Sources: Non-exegetical texts, such as *Risala Qushayriyya*, enrich the analysis (al-Sarraj, 1990).
- Conceptual Flexibility: Acknowledging perspectives such as unity of existence ensures inclusivity (Ibn al-‘Arabi, 1999).
- Comparative Analysis: Contrasting Sufi and non-Sufi exegesis (e.g., al-Tabari) clarifies methodological distinctions.

The “Center and Periphery” Model and Its Critique

Elucidation of the “Center and Periphery” Model in Coppens’ View

The model of “center and periphery” proposed by Coppens and inspired by Edward Shils’ sociological theory, reimagines Sufism’s relationship with the broader religious tradition as a dynamic interplay between dominant religious institutions (the “center”) and Sufi innovations (the “periphery”). In Nishapur, Coppens argues that Sufis such as al-Qushayri and al-Sulami engaged with Ash‘ari theology and hadith traditions, positioning themselves within the religious center (Coppens, 2018). Their commentaries and studies, such as al-Sulami’s *Tabaqat al-Sufiyya*, reflect this integration, aligning Sufism with prophetic traditions. Coppens highlights Nishapur’s role under Seljuk rule as a hub of religious discourse, where Sufis gained influence through khanqahs and scholarly activities.

Critique and Limitations

The “center and periphery” model, while innovative, oversimplifies the complex socio-religious landscape of medieval Islam:

- Simplification of Dynamics: Nishapur’s religious rivalries (e.g., between Karramis and Shafi‘is) reveal Sufis’ variable positions, lacking a uniform centrality (Shafiei Kadkani, 1990).
- Non-Indigenous Framework: Shils’ model, designed for modern societies, assumes a singular central authority, incompatible with medieval Islam’s decentralized religious landscape.
- Limited Evidence: Coppens’ reliance on al-Qushayri and al-Sulami lacks broader institutional analysis (e.g., khanqahs’ roles).
- Neglect of Discursive Strategies: Sufis’ use of hadith and theology to legitimize their position (e.g., al-Qushayri, 2007) requires a dynamic framework such as Asad’s discursive tradition.
- Underestimation of Institutions: Khanqahs, such as Abu Sa‘id’s in Nishapur, were centers of influence, complicating the center-periphery binary (Safi, 2006).
- Overgeneralization: Coppens’ Nishapur-centric model overlooks marginal Sufis in Baghdad (e.g., al-Hallaj) or Andalusia (Ibn al-‘Arif).

Textual Evidence

Textual evidence from Sufi commentaries and non-exegetical texts confirms the limitations of the “center and periphery” model:

- ‘Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri (“When Moses came to Our appointed time” [Qur’ān 7:143]): Al-Qushayri (2007, p. 113) uses hadith narrations to articulate the vision of God: “The vision of the Real in the hereafter lies with the heart of the believer.” This strategic use of hadith

demonstrates a dynamic discursive interaction with traditional scholars, which Shils's static model fails to capture.

- Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (*Tabaqat al-Sufiyya*): Al-Sulami considers Sufis as continuators of the prophetic tradition: "Sufis are followers of the Prophet's tradition" (al-Sulami, 1985, p. 167). However, he also refers to scholars' criticisms of some Sufis, indicating their variable position. This dual portrayal highlights the fluidity of Sufi positions, challenging the binary center-periphery framework.
- Rashid al-Din Maybudi ("When Moses came to Our appointed time" [Qur'ān 7:143]): Maybudi (1992, p. 234) uses Hanafi and Sufi traditions to interpret the vision of God: "The vision of the Real lies in self-purification and practice." This integration of juridical and mystical discourses reflects a networked interaction, not a simple center-periphery dichotomy.
- Al-Sarraj (*al-Luma' fi al-Tasawwuf*): Al-Sarraj emphasizes the legitimacy of Sufism through adherence to Sharia: "The Sufi is one who follows the Quran and Sunna" (al-Sarraj, 1990, p. 45). This non-exegetical text illustrates Sufi efforts to align with mainstream religious norms, complicating Coppens' peripheral categorization.
- Al-Tabari (Qur'ān 7:143): Al-Tabari's (2001) exegesis, focusing on the legal and narrative aspects of Moses' request, contrasts with Sufi interpretations: "Moses' request was denied due to divine transcendence" (p. 45). This non-Sufi perspective highlights the distinct methodological approaches that Coppens' model overlooks.

Table 2. Comparison of Discursive Strategies in Sufi Texts Challenging the "Center and Periphery" Model

| Author | Text | Discursive Strategy | Interpretation of Qur'ān 7:143 | Challenge to Coppens' Model |
|-------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Al-Qushayri | <i>Lata'if al-Isharat</i> | Use of hadith | Vision as heart-based | Dynamic interaction, not static |
| Al-Sulami | <i>Tabaqat al-Sufiyya</i> | Prophetic tradition | Sufis as tradition continuators | Fluid position, not binary |
| Maybudi | <i>Kashf al-Asrar</i> | Hanafi-Sufi synthesis | Vision through purification | Networked discourse |
| Al-Sarraj | <i>al-Luma'</i> | Sharia adherence | Sufism as orthodox | Challenges peripheral status |
| Al-Tabari | <i>Jami' al-Bayan</i> | Legal-narrative focus | Divine transcendence | Highlights Sufi distinctiveness |

Historical Evidence

Historical sources also confirm the limitations of Coppens' model:

- *The History of Nishapur* (Abu 'Abd Allah Shafiei Kadkani): Shafiei Kadkani (1990) refers to the rivalry between the Karramis and Shafi'is: "The Karramis, due to their claims of miracles, were rejected by the Shafi'is" (p. 234). This rivalry indicates the marginal position of some Sufi groups, contradicting Coppens' central placement.
- *Reports on the History of Isfahan* (Abu Nu'aym al-Isfahani): Abu Nu'aym (1997, p. 123) refers to the role of Sufis in dhikr circles and their spiritual influence: "Sufis in dhikr circles held spiritual authority." This influence suggests a networked authority, neither fully central nor peripheral.
- *The History of Baghdad* (al-Khatib al-Baghdadi): Al-Khatib (1997) refers to the rejection of al-Hallaj: "Al-Hallaj was executed due to mystical claims" (p. 112). This example underscores the marginality of some Sufis in specific contexts.
- *Biographies of Noble Figures* (al-Dhahabi): Al-Dhahabi (1996) refers to al-Qushayri's dual role: "Al-Qushayri was both an Ash'ari scholar and a Sufi" (p. 89). This dual role reflects a complex position within a network of discourses, incompatible with Shils's model.

Proposed Improvements

The ISEM addresses the limitations of the "center and periphery" model:

- Discursive Tradition Framework: Asad's (1986) framework captures Sufis' dynamic engagement with religious discourses.
- Institutional Analysis: Examining khanqahs and dhikr circles clarifies Sufi influence (Safi, 2006).

- Broader Sources: Historical texts, such as *The History of Baghdad*, provide context for Sufi positions (al-Khatib, 1997).
- Regional Focus: Analyzing Baghdad and Andalusia limits generalizations.

Integrated Sufi Exegesis Model (ISEM)

To address the limitations of Coppens' frameworks, this study proposes the Integrated Sufi Exegesis Model (ISEM), a comprehensive analytical framework that combines textual-historical, phenomenological, discursive, and social network analyses. The ISEM is designed to provide a nuanced, context-sensitive approach to studying Sufi Quranic commentaries, addressing the shortcomings of Coppens' models by prioritizing indigenous concepts and interdisciplinary methods.

Components of the ISEM

- **Textual-Historical Analysis:** Examines commentaries within their socio-historical contexts as well as accounting for regional and temporal variations. For example, al-Qushayri's *Lata'if al-Isharat* reflects Nishapur's Ash'ari influence, while Ibn al-'Arif's *Mahasin al-Majalis* is shaped by Andalusian intuitive mysticism.
- **Phenomenological Analysis:** Focuses on mystical experiences through indigenous Sufi concepts, such as *fana* (annihilation), *qurb* (proximity), and *tajalli* (divine manifestation). This component captures the experiential diversity absent in Coppens' boundary-centric framework.
- **Discursive Analysis:** Analyzes interactions between Sufi commentaries and broader religious discourses (e.g., hadith, theology), using Asad's concept of discursive tradition. For instance, al-Qushayri's use of hadith in *Risala Qushayriyya* legitimizes Sufism within orthodox frameworks.
- **Social Network Analysis:** Maps institutional and social relationships, such as khanqahs, dhikr circles, and political patronage, to situate Sufis within their socio-religious networks. For example, Abu Sa'id Abu al-Khayr's khanqah in Nishapur illustrates Sufi influence beyond a center-periphery binary.

Application: The ISEM is applied through a four-step process:

- **Textual-Historical Analysis:** Identifies the commentary's historical and social context (e.g., al-Qushayri's *Lata'if al-Isharat* in 5th-century Nishapur).
- **Phenomenological Analysis:** Extracts key mystical concepts (e.g., *qurb* in al-Qushayri's interpretation of Qur'an 7:143).
- **Discursive Analysis:** Examines references to hadith, theology, or jurisprudence (e.g., al-Qushayri's integration of Ash'ari concepts).
- **Social Network Analysis:** Maps the commentator's institutional ties (e.g., al-Qushayri's roles in madrasas and khanqahs).

Case Study: Applying ISEM to al-Qushayri's *Lata'if al-Isharat*

- **Textual-Historical Analysis:** Al-Qushayri's commentary, written in Nishapur during the 5th century AH, reflects the city's role as a hub of Ash'ari and Shafi'i scholarship, shaping his interpretive approach (Shafiei Kadkani, 1990).
- **Phenomenological Analysis:** Al-Qushayri (2007) interprets Qur'an (7:143) as an experience of divine proximity (*qurb*): "The vision of God lies in the proximity of the heart" (p. 112). This concept emphasizes internal spirituality over boundary-crossing.
- **Discursive Analysis:** Al-Qushayri (2007) employs hadith narrations to align his interpretation with orthodox discourse: "The vision of the Real is within the heart of the believer" (p. 113).
- **Social Network Analysis:** Al-Qushayri's dual role as an Ash'ari scholar and Sufi, coupled with his leadership in Nishapur's religious institutions, positions him within a complex network of influence (al-Dhahabi, 1996).

This case study demonstrates the ISEM's ability to capture the multifaceted nature of Sufi exegesis, addressing Coppens' oversimplifications by integrating contextual, conceptual, discursive, and institutional dimensions.

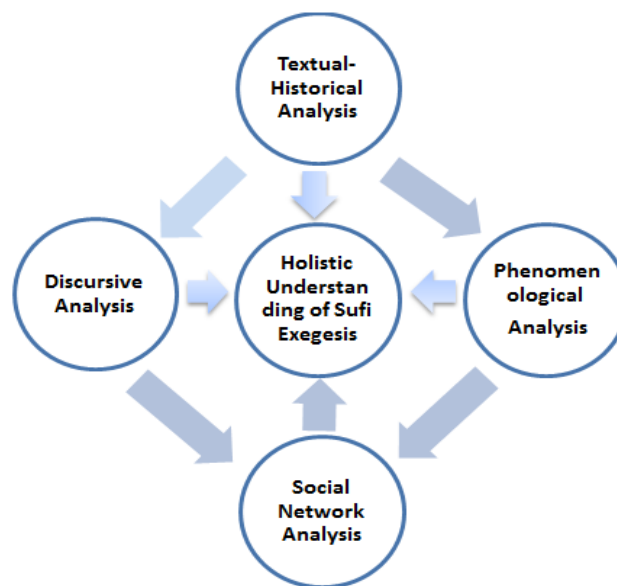


Fig. 1. Integrated Sufi Exegesis Model (ISEM)

Comparison with Coppens’ Frameworks: The ISEM overcomes the limitations of Coppens’ frameworks by:

- **Embracing Conceptual Diversity:** Unlike the “crossing the boundary” model, the ISEM accounts for varied Sufi concepts (*fana*, *qurb*, *tajalli*), as observed in the case study of al-Qushayri.
- **Avoiding Non-Indigenous Theories:** By prioritizing indigenous concepts and Asad’s discursive tradition, the ISEM aligns with the Islamic context, unlike Coppens’ reliance on Lange and Shils.
- **Incorporating Institutional Dynamics:** The social network component addresses the role of khanqahs and patronage, which Coppens’ model of “center and periphery” oversimplifies.
- **Providing Robust Evidence:** The ISEM’s multi-method approach ensures comprehensive textual and historical analysis, countering Coppens’ limited evidence base.

Therefore, the ISEM offers a flexible, context-sensitive framework that enhances the study of Sufi commentaries while respecting their historical and cultural specificity.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined Peter Coppens’ frameworks of “crossing the boundary” and “center and periphery,” revealing their limitations in analyzing Sufi Quranic commentaries. These limitations include reliance on non-indigenous theories, oversimplification of conceptual and historical diversity, ambiguity in defining key concepts, lack of robust evidence, and neglect of discursive and institutional dynamics. Textual evidence from commentaries by al-Sulami, al-Qushayri, Maybudi, Ruzbihan, Tustari, and others, alongside historical sources, such as *The History of Nishapur* and *The History of Baghdad*, confirms these shortcomings. For instance, Ruzbihan’s emphasis on *tajalli* and Ibn al-‘Arabi’s *wahdat al-wujud* challenge the “crossing the boundary” model while al-Qushayri’s discursive strategies and the marginality of figures such as al-Hallaj undermine the “center and periphery” framework.

To address these issues, this study proposes the Integrated Sufi Exegesis Model (ISEM), which combines textual-historical, phenomenological, discursive, and social network analyses. The ISEM, as demonstrated through its application to al-Qushayri’s *Lata’if al-Isharat*, offers a holistic approach that respects the diversity of Sufi thought, prioritizes indigenous concepts, and integrates institutional contexts. By bridging the gap between Sufi texts and their socio-historical realities, the ISEM challenges orientalist stereotypes and fosters interdisciplinary dialogue in Islamic studies. Its flexibility enables it to adapt to various regional and temporal contexts, making it a transformative tool for Sufi scholarship.

Future research could apply the ISEM to other Sufi texts, such as Andalusian commentaries by Ibn al-‘Arif or later studies such as Rumi’s *Mathnawi*, to test its versatility. Additionally, digital humanities approaches, such as mapping Sufi networks or conducting corpus analysis of commentaries, could enhance the ISEM’s social network and discursive components. This study underscores the importance of combined methodologies in Sufi studies, urging researchers to move beyond Western-centric frameworks toward indigenous, context-sensitive models such as the ISEM. By doing so, scholars can deepen our understanding of Islamic intellectual history and the enduring legacy of Sufi exegesis.

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