



SUFISM IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: FROM CLASSICAL TRADITIONS TO MODERN INTERPRETATIONS

Submitted: 28 October
2024

Revised: 20 November
2024

Published: 30 November
2024

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KEYWORDS

Tasawuf, Modernitas,
Kontemporer

ABSTRACT

Sufism is a spiritual dimension of Islam that grew out of the early Islamic tradition of asceticism, where the companions and followers of the Prophet lived simply to draw closer to God. This research explores the historical development of Sufism from the 3rd to the 6th centuries of the Islamic calender, focusing such as Hasan al-Basri, Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah, Al-Junaid al-Baghdadi and Al-Ghazali played significant roles in shaping Sufism, emphasizing a balance between spirituality and Islamic law. From the 6th to the 11th centuries, Sufism became institutionalized through various Sufi orders like Qadiriyya and Naqshabandiyya, which spread Islam to regions like the Indonesian archipelago. These orders effectively combined Islamic teachings with local cultures. While some criticized Sufism for deviating from Islamic law, reformers like Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi ensured its continued relevance. Today, Sufism offers spiritual solutions to modern challenges such as materialism and individualism, guiding Muslims toward a deeper connection with God. Sufi teachings not only purify the soul but also strengthen morality and promote social harmony.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sufism is a part of Islam that focuses on the spiritual and mystical side of being Muslim. It's not just about the outward practices of religion, but also about understanding our connection with God on a deeper level (Simuh, 2001). Historically, Sufism emerged as a response to the increasing formalization of religion and materialism in society. Figures like Al-Ghazali, who was a major pillar in spreading Sufi values, continue to influence people today. Through practices such as purifying

the soul (*tazkiyah al-nafs*), remembrance (*zikr*), contemplation (*muraqabah*) and deep reflection (*tafakkur*), Sufism offers a profound understanding of the human relationship with God.

Historically, the term 'Sufism' is linked to the word 'suf' (wool), which refers to the simple clothing worn by early Sufis as a symbol of their simplicity and indifference to worldly luxuries (Al-Jurjani, 1992). However, seeing responses from socio-political perspective, Muslim began to be influenced by luxury and materialism, especially after the massive expansions during the Umayyad and Abbasid eras. As Muslims enjoyed increasing political and economic power, some groups felt that the spiritual dimension of Islam needed to be re-emphasized to balance the growing formalization of rituals. Figures such as Hasan al-Basri (642-728) were among the first to emphasize the importance of introspection, self-control and a simple life. Hasan al-Basri is considered one of the pioneers of asceticism, reminding people the importance of focusing their lives on God amidst worldly temptations.

Sufism became increasingly systematic in the 9th century, with the development of concepts such as *maqamat* (spiritual stations) and *ahwal* (spiritual states). This period marked the emergence of Sufi literature documenting the experiences and teachings of Sufis. The 11th century was a significant period in the history of Sufism, with the emergence of figures like al-Ghazali (1058-1111 CE) who reformed Sufism through his work *Ihya Ulum al-Din*. He harmonized the spiritual dimension of Sufism with Islamic law, making it more acceptable to scholars and the Muslim community in general (Hourani, 1991). Al-Ghazali's ideas formed the foundation for the balanced development of Sufism, combining spiritual dimensions with Islamic law, which continues to this day. In the Nusantara region, Sufism played a crucial role in the spread of Islam. By adapting to local cultures, Islam was peacefully accepted and integrated into society. The Walisongo, for example, used Sufi teachings to introduce Islam to Java through wisdom and compassion (Azra, 2004) ultimately connecting Islamic values to local traditions.

This research focuses on the theoretical aspect of examining in detail the historical development and practical application of Sufism in the context of contemporary Muslim life. This study specifically discusses a holistic approach that combines historical analysis, the stages of *maqamat* in Sufism and the relevance of modern Sufi practices in everyday life. The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive historical approach and the exploration of Sufi *maqamat* as the primary pillar in building the spiritual dimension of the community.

The research also touches on Sufi orders, materialism and identity crises, making the relevance of Sufism increasingly significant. Islamic mysticism offers a space for reflection on the essence of life amidst the rapid flow of globalization that often erodes spiritual values. This raises questions about historical understanding of the development of Sufism from asceticism to the practice of *tariqat*. To what extent are Sufi values such as introspection, self-control and spiritual balance relevant in addressing the current moral crisis and spiritual emptiness?

Due to the limited literature specifically examining the historical understanding of Sufism, this article aims to provide a deeper understanding of Sufism, not only as a spiritual tradition but also as an early approach is also expected to be an academic reference for the development of Sufism studies and spiritual solutions in the amidst of changing times.

II. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method with a historical approach to analyze the development of Sufism from the early Islamic period to its relevance in the modern era. This approach allows researchers to explore the connections between the spiritual practices of Sufism and the social, political and cultural conditions of Muslim communities throughout history. This research involves four stages: heuristic, verification, interpretation and historiography. The first stage, heuristic, is the process of collecting relevant sources for the research. The sources collected in this research are not limited to secondary sources such as books and scholarly articles, but also include primary sources (Kaelan, 2005). The primary sources include works by Sufi figures like *Ihya Ulum al-Din* (by Al-Ghazali), *AL-Risalah* (by Al-Qusyairi) and other classic texts. After collecting these sources, they were verified using research journals, articles and scholarly works on the history of Sufism and its modern adaptations. The next step was interpretation, where the verified data was interpreted within the context of history and the relevance of its themes. The final stage was historiography, which involved organizing the interpreted results into coherent and systematic written work.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Sufism Definition

The word "tasawuf" originates from the word "Shuffah," referring to the porch of the Prophet's Mosque where some of the Prophet's companions stayed, or a group of companions who lived simply and focused on worshipping Allah. Tasawuf shares similarities with the root word "Suf" (wool), which was worn by early Sufis, or "safa" (purity), which they sought to achieve. Other interpretations have been discussed repeatedly in ancient and modern sources, but the most important metaphysical meaning is divine wisdom. The term "tasawuf" is associated with the spirit of asceticism and devotion to worship demonstrated by this group of companions. Terminologically, as a science within Islam that emphasizes spiritual aspects, Sufism places more emphasis on the spiritual dimension than the physical one (Shabir, 2017). Sufism also emphasizes a deep and inner understanding of religious teachings, beyond the outward or literal understanding (Masri, 2023). Sufi masters tend to value spiritual qualities more than physical ones. They believe that everything, including the ultimate goal or what we know as God, has a spiritual dimension. In their view, the spiritual world is considered more real and substantial. The spiritual lives of Sufis have led to other terms or nicknames associated with them. Some of these names include *ahlal-*

tariqah (followers of a spiritual path), ahlal-isyarat (people who learn through metaphors), ahlal-dil (people who use their hearts, in Persian), and others (Sayyid Hossein Nasr, 2015). From these various definitions, we can conclude that the term 'tasawuf' encompasses the meanings of 'shafa' (purity), 'wara' (extreme caution to avoid violating religious boundaries), and 'ma'rifah' (divine knowledge or knowledge of the essence of all things). However, all agree that this term is related to the root 'shafa' meaning 'pure'.

The Evolution of Sufism: From Asceticism to Sufi Orders

The practice of asceticism developed in the early Islamic period, around the 2nd century AH (8th century CE), when some of the Prophet's companions and their followers felt the need to emphasize a simple life, deep introspection and a focus on drawing closer to God. This was a response to the increasing luxury and materialism that began to creep into the lives of Muslims as Islamic power expanded (Nasution, 1992). These ascetics practiced intensive worship and avoided worldly attachments, which later became the foundation of the Sufi tradition.

The transformation from asceticism to Sufism occurred in the 3rd century AH (9th century CE) when individual piety began to evolve into a more systematic spiritual tradition. During this period, concepts such as maqamat (spiritual stations) and ahwal (spiritual states) emerged, describing the journey of the soul towards closeness to Allah (Arberry, 1991). Important figures in this phase were Hasan al-basri, who emphasized the importance of morality and introspection, and Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah, who introduced the concept of love for God (mahabbah) as the primary motivation to worship (Saeed, 2007).

In the 4th and 5th centuries AH (10th and 11th centuries CE), Sufism was recognized as a distinct branch of Islamic knowledge. Scholars like Al-Junaid al-Baghdadi pioneered classic Sufi concepts that combined spiritual dimensions with adherence to Islamic law. This period also marked the emergence of Sufi literature documenting the teachings of the Sufis. On the other hand, Al-Ghazali (1058-1111 CE) played a major role in reforming Sufism through his work 'Ihya Ulum al-Din'. Al-Ghazali emphasized that Sufism must be in line with Islamic law, making it more acceptable to Islamic scholars and the general Muslim community. By integrating the spiritual dimension (haqīqat) and the external dimension (shari'ah), Al-Ghazali ensured that Sufism remained an integral part of Islamic teachings (Hourani, 1991).

The institutionalization of Sufism occurred in the 6th century AH (12th century CE) when Sufism developed into a more organized form through Sufi orders. Sufi orders such as Qadiriyya, Naqshbandiyya, and Shadhiliyya played a significant role in spreading Islamic teachings to various regions, including Persia, Central Asia, India, and the Nusantara archipelago. In the Nusantara, Sufism became an effective tool for dawah (Islamic propagation) through a localized cultural approach, as exemplified by the Wali Songo. One of its figures, Sunan Kalijaga, used Sufi values

such as tawakkul (trust in God) and zuhud (simplicity) to bridge Islamic teachings with local traditions (Azra, 2004).

However, as Sufism developed, it faced criticism from certain groups who believed that some of its practices deviated from Islamic law. Ibn Taymiyyah, for example, criticized certain aspects of Sufism that he considered excessive and incompatible with Islamic teachings (Nasr, 2007: 112). This criticism led to reform efforts by figures such as Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi, who introduced the concept of mujaddid (reformer) to reform Sufism and bring it closer to Islamic law. In addition, Al-Ghazali also made significant contributions to ensuring that Sufism remained aligned with Islamic legal values (Hourani, 1991).

In *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, al-Ghazali's ultimate goal is to sever the soul's connection with worldly desires. In simpler terms, the purpose of asceticism is to achieve happiness, which is the highest spiritual station for spiritual travelers. Asceticism isn't just about giving up possessions, clothing, or a comfortable home; it's about purifying the heart. Anyone who has studied al-Ghazali's life would agree. As Abu Sulaiman ad-Darani said, *"We've heard a lot about asceticism, and to us, it means giving up everything that distracts you from God."* And then he quoted the Quran, *"Except for those who come to Allah with a sound heart"* (26:89), adding, *"A sound heart is one that contains nothing but Allah."* Ibrahim ibn Adham said, *"Asceticism regarding what's forbidden is obligatory, asceticism regarding what's lawful is good, and asceticism regarding doubtful things is safe."* Yahya ibn Mu'ad said, *"A true ascetic is one who has enough to eat, enough clothing to cover himself, and a simple place to live; the world is his prison."* (Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*). This history of asceticism not only gives us a universal meaning but also suggests a balanced approach between the world and the afterlife.

History of Sufi Orders

Sufism has developed since the beginning of Islamic civilization as an effort to draw closer to God through the purification of the soul, the control of desires and the planting of noble character (Susanti, L, 2018). Historically, the currents of Sufism began to form in the 2nd century of the Hijri calendar, rooted in the life of simplicity of the companions and the *tabi'in* who avoided worldly luxuries, such as Hasan al-Basri, who is known for his asceticism and surrender to God. Over time, Sufism developed into two main forms, namely Sunni Sufism and philosophical Sufism.

Sunni Sufism focuses on character development by following the Quran and Sunnah in a formalistic manner. This branch avoids speculation and the use of philosophical terminology. Figures in Sunni Sufism, such as Imam al-Ghazali, Abu al-Qasim al-Qusyairi and al-Kalabadi, taught *maqamat* (spiritual stations) that include repentance, patience, trust in God, asceticism and divine love (Noer, 2001). Sunni Sufism emphasizes the importance of combining the inner and outer aspects of human relationship with God. This teaching is more aimed at educating character

and maintaining a balance between the external laws of Islam and spirituality, without involving controversial concepts such as the “incarnation of God” or the “unity of existence.”

Different from Sunni Sufism, Philosophical Sufism began to emerge in the 6th century of the Hijri calendar, influenced by Greek philosophy and the writings of the Ikhwan al-Safa. This branch combines mysticism with rationalism, using philosophical terminology to convey its teachings. Figures in philosophical Sufism, such as Ibn ‘Arabi, are known for speculative concepts such as the unity of existence (*wahdatul wujud*), which is often difficult to understand due to its deep symbolism. Nevertheless, philosophical Sufism still bases its thought on Islamic sources such as the Qura and Hadith, although with a more philosophical interpretation (Idris, 2003).

Both of these traditions have developed in various Islamic regions with different approaches and methodologies. Sunni Sufism is more widely embraced by the general public and scholars who are oriented towards moral education and the practical aspects of Islamic law, while philosophical Sufism appeals to intellectual and philosophers who delve into metaphysical aspects. The existence of these two traditions demonstrates the diversity in efforts to understand and draw closer to God, as well as how Islamic values are applied in different social and cultural contexts throughout history.

A Three-Stage Approach to Spiritual Purification in Sufism

According to a Sufi of that time, to reach the perfect station (*wasul*) in one’s spiritual journey, one must follow these three paths:

First, there is *takhalli*, a purification of a person in early ascetic tradition practiced by Sufis. The method of *takhalli* cleanses a person’s character of its more repulsive qualities. Dependence on worldly pleasures is one of the most vile things because it encourages the development of shameful traits, both physical and mental. This concept is rooted in the ascetic tradition of the 2nd century AH/8th century CE, reflected in the lives of the prophet’s companions and the generation of the *tabi’in*. Hasan al-Basri was a prominent figure who emphasized the importance of morality and emptying the heart of worldly love to achieve closeness to God.

Second, there is *tahalli*, adorning oneself with noble character in the spiritual system. In the 3rd to 5th centuries AH, Sufism began to develop a systematic spiritual approach. Practices such as patience, gratitude, trust in God (*tawakkal*) and love for God (*mahabbah*) became the central parts of *tahalli*. Figures like Al-Junaid, Al-Baghdadi and Rabi’ah al-Adawiyah played key roles in introducing *tahalli* as a step to cultivate love and tranquility in one’s relationship with God.

Third, *tajalli* is the peak of the spiritual journey, where a Sufi achieves unity with the will of God. In classical tradition, *tajalli* is often linked with *fana’* (annihilation of the ego) and *baqa’* (eternal existence in God). Works like al-Ghazali’s *Ihya Ulum al-Din* and the thoughts of Ibn ‘Arabi delve deep into the concepts of *tajalli* as an experience of true happiness with God (Muhammad Nur dkk, 2023).

The spiritual journey was also integrated into Sufi orders such as Qadiriyya and Naqshabandiyya, which globally spread these teachings, including to the Nusantara archipelago. In the modern era, these concepts remain relevant in helping individuals face spiritual and materialistic challenges, offering inner peace through spiritual discipline. When a person has good morals, they are more likely to maintain their mental and physical well-being, protect the environment and meet their own emotional and psychological needs (Muhammad Anzaikhan: 2021). Consequently, they will never experience moral or ethical crises. Furthermore, the principles that underlie the husband-wife relationship produce peace and harmony in life, which can be used to heal and avoid various crises (spiritual, moral and cultural).

The essence of Sufi teachings, from one era to the next, has centered on developing an intimate and conscious relationship with God, to the point where a person can consciously experience God's presence. This is done, separately, through introspection, as a way to avoid worldly attachments which are, essentially, unstable and temporary. Because modern society has a "divided soul," with people living separately and becoming more individualistic, the Sufi worldview has become more important than ever. However, the view of the purpose of Sufism is not carried out exclusively and individually, but rather has implications for answering various problems faced (Ismail Fahmi Arrauf Nasution, 2019).

According to Jalaludin Rakhmat, global awareness of the importance of incorporating ethical considerations into scientific advancements is growing. This is being realized through the establishment of various institutions that serve as moral guardians of science in developed countries. One example is the Hastings Center, New York, which is widely known as a center for the study of ethics in science. Jalaludin Rakhmat quotes Sir Macfarlane Burnet, who stated that experimental scientists are often reluctant to acknowledge the limitations of their knowledge. However, science without ethics carries great risks, including the destructive potential of technological advancement such as weapons, which can turn around to destroy their creators. This view affirms that science and ethics must go hand in hand to ensure that scientific progress does not harm, but rather benefits humanity as whole (Abdul Hakim Habibullah, 2022).

And this is where modern Sufism is useful, with its spiritual-divine conception of scientific reality that goes beyond mere relationship, coherence, and pragmatism. This means that divine guidance (sacred texts), historical lessons, spiritual exercises, testimonies, and spiritual revelations, in addition to rational reasoning and empirical sensory perception, all contribute to the development of a person's knowledge base. The great Sufi thinker Jalaluddin Rumi once said that relying solely on one's intellectual abilities is like standing on a child's shaky wooden leg to gain knowledge and truth (Yulisman Bin Nazim Agus, 2018). Sufism instructs its followers to look beyond the surface and uncover the truth beneath all religions

IV. CONCLUSION

Sufism has its roots in the tradition of asceticism that developed during the early Islamic period, around the 2nd century of Hijri (8th century CE). During this time, the companions of the prophet and the following generation chose to live simply, avoiding worldly luxuries and drawing closer to God through intensive worship.

Asceticism then developed into a more structured Sufism in the 3rd century Hijri (9th century CE), marked by the emergence of spiritual concepts such as *maqamat* (spiritual stations) and *ahwal* (states of the soul). Figures like Hasan al-Basri and Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah pioneered Sufi teachings with a focus on morality and love for God (mahabbah). In the 4th and 5th centuries Hijri (10th-11th centuries CE), Sufism began to be recognized as a discipline integrated with sharia, with major contributions from figures such as Al-Junaid al-Baghdadi and Al-Ghazali, who emphasized the importance of balance between the spiritual dimension and Islamic law.

A major transformation occurred in the 6th century Hijri (12th Century CE) when Sufism was institutionalized through orders as the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya. These orders not only strengthened Sufi teachings internally but also played a significant role in spreading Islam to various regions, including the Nusantara archipelago. In Nusantara, Sufism became an effective approach to dawah, combining Islamic spiritual values with local traditions. Figures like the Walisongo used Sufi teachings to build cultural and religious harmony in society. However, throughout its history, Sufism has also faced criticism from certain groups who consider some of its practices to deviate from sharia. This criticism prompted reformers such as Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi and Al-ghazali to reform sufism to remain relevant and in line with Islamic teachings. Until modern era, Sufism has remained an integral part of Islam, offering spiritual solutions to the challenges of materialism and individualism and addressing moral and spiritual challenges in an ever-evolving world.

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