

## SUFISM AND VIRTUAL PIETY A Narration of the Millennial *Murshid* in North Sumatra

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**Abstract:** The millennial *murshid* comprises young *tariqah* leaders, who are well-versed in the latest information technology. Sufism identity has changed under the millennial *murshid* due to the development of information technology and their participation in social media which tries to revive the doctrine and ritual in the changing global reality. This condition has fostered Sufistic activism in a new direction from a “quiet road” to a “public road” in cyberspace. This article has explored the intersection between Sufism and social media based on the narration of the millennial *murshid* of Tariqa Naqshabandiyya-Khalidiyya Serambi Babussalam. The findings illustrate that the phenomenon of virtual Sufism that has emerged from the intersection between Sufism and social media has given birth to a new expression of piety called as virtual piety. It is a simplification of piety from the original form of Sufistic tradition that emphasizes symbolic-esoteric aspects and is likely as opposed to individual piety. Additionally, the millennial *murshid* has successfully used social media, particularly Facebook, to reach out to the online community and gain followers.

**Keywords:** Millennial *murshid*, virtual sufism, Tariqa Naqshabandiyya, North Sumatra.

### Introduction

Sufism is a spiritual movement whose eschatological orientation is to search for God and shun materialism. However, the sufis cannot ignore the lure into the life of the world, given that they are also part of society. The activities of the Sufis confirm that they are actively involved in other aspects of life, including economic, social, and

politics.<sup>1</sup> Ideally, the life of Sufis is a road to eternity, and contribution in the world with piety is decisive to success in the eternity.

It is inevitably, change has been witnessed in various social and economic sectors, including information technology. The advancement of information technology has led to innovations such as social media tools that nearly all people depend on social media for information. In this situation, the spiritual movement of *ṭarīqah*, a sub-organization in Muslim society, has its way of self-actualizing and strategy for survival, specifically in the wake of the continuing worldwide changes while maintaining unique doctrine and tradition. The millennial *murshid* of Tariqa Naqshabandiyya-Khalidiya Serambi Babussalam (TNKSB), for instance, is using Facebook for taking momentum in embracing the importance of social media.

The millennial *murshid* in this article refers to the *ṭarīqah* of Naqshabandiya-Khalidiyah Babussalam (TNKB), which is influential in the Malay world.<sup>2</sup> They comprises the young generation, with zeal over the use of information technology.<sup>3</sup> Their style differs from the conventional *murshid* of *ṭarīqah* and ordinary older people who do not thrives and develops with technological advancements such as Facebook, a global networking platform. In a nutshell, the social identity of millennial *murshid* always exists on social media. According to them, Facebook is the most suitable media to introduce and teach Sufism as part of the strategy to keep the spiritual tradition in the wake of global change.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Djafar, "Business Behavior of Tariqa Followers in Indonesia: The Relation of Religion, Sufism and Work Ethic", *Ulul Albab*, 19, 2 (2018), 253-268; Alix Philippon, "The Role of Sufism in the Identity Construction, Mobilization and Political Activism of the Barelwi Movement in Pakistan", *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 7, 1 (2014), 155.

<sup>2</sup> Ziaulhaq Hidayat and Syahrul, Muzakkir, "Indonesian Sufi in Malay World: A Preliminary Exploration with Reference to Tariqa Naqshabandiyya-Khalidiyya Babussalam (TNKB)", *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, 11, 1 (2017), 201-222.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Slama, "Practising Islam through Social Media in Indonesia", *Indonesia and Malay World*, 46 (134), 2018, 1-4, Jonathon Epstein, "Introduction: Generation X, Youth Culture and Identity", Jonathon Epstein, ed., *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 1-23

<sup>4</sup> "Cerita Hikmah dari Syeikh Rajagukguk: Meninggalkan Dunia Kerja demi Dakwah", *Toba Pos*, 11 Agustus 2016, <http://www.tobapos.com/2016/08/cerita-hikmah-dari-syeikh-rajagukguk.html> "Hulman Silaturrahmi ke Syeikh Ahmad Sabban Rajagukguk", *Top Smart*, 09 October 2019.

The millennial *murshid* was appointed to his father's position as Tuan Guru or *murshid* of TNKSB. Following the Tariqa tradition, Naqshabandiyya leader replacement takes precedence from family (*dhurriyyah*) because the son of *mmurshid* is considered the heir to the father.<sup>5</sup> Before the endorsement to become a *murshid*, he was an activist and a bank manager in one of the banking branches in North Sumatera, Indonesia.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, he had joined various organizations, including youth and religious organizations. With his vast experience, it is expected that he would provide a strong influence in the revitalization of Sufism in virtual when finally crowned the *murshid* of *tariqah*. This is yet another millennial *murshid* identity, which strengthens the spiritual Sufism symbolic activities in social media.

Symbolic identity in millennial *murshid* activities has been behind the influence witnessed in the formation of Sufism, different from conventional Sufism. Conventional Sufism was considered a “lonely world” different from the outside world, while “in hand” or millennial *murshid* was interpreted as something to behold in all situations. The effort to present Sufism in the global world through social media is understood as part of preserving and continuing to live in spirituality.<sup>7</sup> Actualization in Sufism is specifically related to the situation that shapes its education and activities.

Sufism identity has changed under the millennial *mmurshid* due to the development of information technology, which tries to “revive” the doctrine and ritual in the changing global reality. This is conducted by showing the identity of Sufism relevant to reality and how the Millennial *murshid* have influenced its perspective and experience that formed it. Also, there are attempts to blind the lives of Sufis regarding some changes taking place, particularly situations that cannot be separated from the advancement of information technology.

The participation of millennial *mmurshid* on social media confirms the change experienced in the Sufism world. This article will discuss

<sup>5</sup> Stephane A. Dudoignon, “A Surrogate Aristocracy? Sufi Adab, Modernity, Rurality and Civilization in Ex-Soviet Central Asia”, Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen (ed.), *Adab and Modernity: “A Civilising Process”? Sixteenth-Twenty-First Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 527-547; Ziaulhaq Hidayat, “Peran Sufi Batak dalam Persaudaraan Lintas Iman di Tanah Batak: Studi Kasus Tarekat Naqsyabandiyah-Khalidiyah Serambi Babussalam (TNKSB)”, *Jurnal Akademika* 21, 2 (2016), 309-336.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.tobapos.com/2016/08/cerita-hikmah-dari-syeikh-rajaguguk.html>

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Ahmad Sabban Rajaguguk, Murshid of Tariqa Naqsyabandiyya-Khalidiyah Serambi Babussalam (TNKSB).

the relevance of millennial *mmurshid* as a representation of contemporary *mmurshid* in Indonesia, specifically the inception of virtual piety in social media.

### Understanding Millennial *Murshid*

As early stated, the millennial *urshid* seeks to present Sufism in light of the development in information technology. The formation of millennial *murshid* has influenced the effort to interpret Sufism in terms of global life.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Sufism activities are being supported by social media, specifically Facebook. The millennial *murshid* is now supporting the use of social media, which has become the “main need” for all businesses, including Sufism.

The use of social media, specifically for millennial *murshid*, was strengthened by creating a Facebook account named “Shufi Life.” The account was majorly created to introduce Sufism virtually and affirm that social media is appropriate for the development of the community. A millennial *murshid* is mandated to manage the Facebook account and update its status every time.<sup>9</sup> The use of Facebook affirms the identity, and at the same time, an effort to introduce Sufism virtually, which is an integral part of the existence of millennial *mmurshid*.<sup>10</sup>

The millennial *murshids* are utilizing social media in an attempt to ensure Sufism corresponds to reality. However, various instances show that the millennial *murshid* sometimes makes subjective posts unrelated to Sufism. Generally, the activities carried out attempt to establish the identity of virtual Sufism. Furthermore, social media options are part of the Sufism projection in the virtual space that cannot be separated from the subjective experience of the millennial *murshid* generation, which is dependent on Facebook.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Ahmad Sabban Rajaguguk, Murshid of Tariqa Naqsyabandiyya-Khalidiyya Serambi Babussalam (TNKSB).

<sup>9</sup> Luthfi Makhasin, “Urban Sufism, Media and Religious Change in Indonesia”, *Ijtima’iyya* 1, 1 (2016), 23-36; Julia Howell, “Sufism on the Silver Screen: Indonesian Innovations in Islamic Televangelis”, *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 2, 2 (2008), 225-237.

<sup>10</sup> Ismail Fajrie Alatas, “Sufi Sociality in Social Media”, Carla Jones and Martin Slama, ed., *Pious, Celebrity, Sociality: A Forum on Islam and Social Media in Southeast Asia*, American Ethnologist, <https://americanethnologist.org/features/collections/piety-celebrity-sociality/sufi-sociality-in-social-media>

### **Scholarship**

The millennial *murshid* is a scholar that has soared the academic heights to attain a doctorate in the field of communication and propaganda.<sup>11</sup> Although not directly related to Sufism activism, it has relevance in strengthening the identity of millennial *murshid* in a broad context. Therefore, any learning not anchored in traditional religious education gives room for the simplification of the term Sufism. This is because it applies the mastery of traditions to bring out the legitimacy of religious diversity. However, the *murshid* scholars understand that the Sufism actualization is carried out by *murshids* who are specialists. The scientific aspects that the millennial *murshid* requires include a green light to realize that the advancement of information technology is an opportunity to be exploited by engaging in technological development.<sup>12</sup>

The high education level attained by the millennial *murshid* gives him the chance to teach at higher learning institutions (private or public). This position provides them the opportunity to strengthen their social status in society. Lecturers in colleges form an intellectual group whose existence makes the millennial *murshid* readily accepted by all circles. Furthermore, their social status can convince the upper-middle class, who mostly are pilgrims TNKSB millennial *murshid*.<sup>13</sup> This is a confirmation to others that Sufism comprises of all groups, both learned and uneducated.<sup>14</sup>

### **Performance**

The millennial *murshid* is comprised of the young generation keen on their physical appearance. The young *murshid* generation pays attention to their way of dress, which is part of the strategy to convince the public that Sufism is not a form of backwardness

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<sup>11</sup> “Tuan Guru Ahmad Sabban Raih Doktor dari IAIN SU”, *Medan Bisnis*, 25 October 2013, <http://www.medanbisnisdaily.com/news/read/2013/10/25/58332/tuan-guru-ahmad-sabban-raih-doktor-dari-iain-su/> [accessed on 23 September 2019]

<sup>12</sup> “Tuan Guru Ahmad Sabban Raih Doktor dari IAIN SU”, *Medan Bisnis*, 25 October 2013, <http://www.medanbisnisdaily.com/news/read/2013/10/25/58332/tuan-guru-ahmad-sabban-raih-doktor-dari-iain-su/> [accessed on 23 September 2019]

<sup>13</sup> Hidayat, “Peran Sufi Batak dalam Persaudaraan Lintas Iman di Tanah Batak, 310.

<sup>14</sup> Yusdani, et.al., “Yogyakarta Urban Middle-Class Sufism: Economic, Political, and Cultural Networks”, *Ulumuna: Journal of Islamic Studies* 23, 2 (2019), 266-293; Armando Salvatore, “Sufi Articulations of Civility, Globality and Sovereignty”, *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 4, 2 (2018), 156-174.

(Rajaguguk, 23 November 2019).<sup>15</sup> The effort to change Sufism identity make the millennial *murshid* a group keen on aspects of appearance. Additionally, the prosperity among the millennial *murshid* is evidenced by the homes they own, excellent vehicles, sophisticated mobile phones, and others. This indicates that Sufism does not always have to be connoted as a religion of the poor. Instead, its followers could also compete favorably and lead decent lives.

The *murshid* appearance is part of the Sufism identity that focuses on the normative aspect. It is part of efforts to strengthen the symbolization of Sufism, which is different from its traditional understanding. However, Sufism is considered spiritual and not linked to the appearance aspect. Thus, the appearance of the millennial *murshid* is overlooked because of the intense activities, specifically teaching at universities or community organizations. Another aspect of the millennial *murshid* is trying to actualize Sufism by following market trends to establish “Joglo Sufis” and “Sufi coffee”.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Intimate Relations with Local Authorities***

The effort to build cordial relationships with the government has been there for a long time, specifically during the previous *murshid* leadership, which saw the spiritual TNKSB institution continue building friendly relations with local authorities.<sup>17</sup> The close relationship was strengthened as a result of the dedicated service to the social organizations. Additionally, the millennial *murshid* leaders understood that a close relationship with the government was an integral part of the actualization and continuation of the *ṭarīqah*. In some Sufism activities conducted, the millennial *murshid* has involved the government not only to show the legitimacy of the *murshid* as a spiritual leader but also as part of efforts to strengthen the existence of the *ṭarīqah* in the social life of the community.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Hidayat, “Peran Sufi Batak dalam Persaudaraan Lintas Iman di Tanah Batak, 310.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with A.S. Rajaguguk, 23 November 2019.

<sup>17</sup> “Hulman Silaturrahmi ke Syeikh Ahmad Sabban Rajaguguk”, *Top Smart*, 09 October 2019, <http://topsmart.co.id/hulman-silaturrahmi-ke-syeikh-ahmad-sabban-rajaguguk/>

<sup>18</sup> Francesco Piraini, “Between Real and Virtual Communities Sufism in Western Societies and the Naqshabandi Haqqani Case”, *Social Compass* 63, 1 (2016), 130-146; Mark Sedgwick, “Sufi Religious Leaders and Sufi Orders in the Contemporary Middle East”, *Sociology of Islam* 6, 2 (2018), 212-232.

Cordial relationships evidenced by the presence of the local rulers, whether consisting of government, politicians, and entrepreneurs, can be seen in various Sufism activities carried out by the millennial *murshids*. However, the presence of the local rulers is not always related to the affirmation part of the perpetrators or TNKSB sympathizers. Certainly, the presence of these people cannot be separated from their various interests. For instance, the presence of local authorities in different TNKSB functions through *murshid* invitation is a form of recognition of its importance in the community. TNKSB is believed to have an extensive network of believers spread across the regions, as shown by the presence of officials who form part of the community. Furthermore, the ability to convince local rulers to attend Sufism activities shows prowess in communication capabilities built by the *murshid*.

### Social Media and Virtual Sufism

*Murshid* of TNKSB is a millennial generation group that understands advancement in information technology. Therefore, Sufism actualization efforts in the social media space are a prime choice for the *murshid* activity. The presence of Sufism in social media is a reality that cannot be denied because the *murshids* are actively involved in the actualization of Sufism in the global community. This implies that a social change in the global society has significantly influenced Sufism.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the millennial *murshid* has resolved to primarily engage in Sufism activities to realize self-actualization as opposed to banking.<sup>20</sup>

The promotion of Sufism on social media provides a new identity to its construction. This was previously considered a spiritual activity far from information technology-based life. However, the millennial *murshid* has made social media a part of strengthening Sufism in the community, which is conducted by increasing image upload about spiritual activities as a new ritual to express it. Virtual Sufism means that the millennial *murshid* is actively involved in introducing Sufism virtually as a new ritual previously unknown to the world. This kind of

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<sup>19</sup> Loana A. Coman and Mihana Coman, "Religion, Popular Culture and Social Media: The Construction of A Religious Leader Image on Facebook", *Journal for Communication Studies* 10, 2 (2017), 129-143; Hoover, Stewart M., *Religion in the Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2006), 26.

<sup>20</sup> "Cerita Hikmah dari Syekh Rajagukguk.

Sufism is practiced by displaying various activities on social media to make them familiar to those without knowing how it is practiced in the lives of *murshids* and the practitioners of the *ṭarīqah*.

Are the millennial *murshids* that bring disagreement among the public involved in Sufism, or are they only sympathizers? Society's opinions have no impact in efforts to "creative" *murshid*, which was conducted to show the face of Sufism on social media. Millennial *murshid* asserts that mystics or Sufis are also part of the global community involved in social media life. The practice of virtual Sufism is conducted by positioning itself as a significant subject to strengthen the existence of Sufism virtually.<sup>21</sup>

Virtual Sufism expresses the efforts to strengthen the new face of Sufism in social media to advance its global identity. It is a new ritual form of Sufism in social media with a virtual as the primary identity, which is a reproduction of the symbolic character of Sufism. Additionally, a virtual is manifest as a reproduction of symbolic identity. It uses the Sufism attribute in each millennial *murshid* Facebook status followed by an image to explain the Sufism symbolic form. The symbolic identity of Sufism includes the *lobe runcing*, robes, and beads, which are widely used on social media. The use of the pointy lobe refers to the initial official symbol of the *ṭarīqah murshids*,<sup>22</sup> which is the leading network of the TNKB lineage.<sup>23</sup> The spiky lobes emphasize the Sufism identity that has a genealogy and status connected with TNKB. The lobe runcing is part of the primary identity of TNKB in the Malay world of Indonesia and Malaysia.

The *lobe runcing* for TNKB is identity about "into the spiritual", implying that its use is only for certain groups, specifically among *murshids*. However, there is a shift to using its symbolic attributes more loosely and not as a typical TNKB *murshid* outfit. However, the use of lobe runcing in the TNKB community has its specificities. First, it is a form of symbolic expression of Sufism to the global society. Second, the *lobe runcing* is part of the *ṭarīqah* attribute on social media, therefore, it is a reinforcement of Sufism's identity on social media. The choice of

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with A.S. Rajagukguk, 23 November 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Ziaulhaq Hidayat, *Kuasa Kelas Bawah dan Bisnis Berkeah di Makam Wali: Narasi Kebidupan Khadim Tarekat* (Ciputat: Pustakapedia, 2019), 121.

<sup>23</sup> Hidayat, "Peran Sufi Batak dalam Persaudaraan Lintas Iman di Tanah Batak, 311



using pointed lobes by the millennial *murshids* as Sufism identities in social media affirms its symbolic identity in the global world.<sup>24</sup>

Another symbolic identity is the robe worn by the millennial *murshids* displaying a picture on their Facebook status. Performance with a robe is associated with the typical Sufism attire that reflects godliness in birth and mind. The cloak symbolizes sainthood or saints to describe the person striving to maintain the purity of self and soul.<sup>25</sup> The robe's appearance is intended to form a public view that Sufism activities are part of piety activities that focus on the substantive aspect and pay attention to the efforts made towards God.

The second symbol displayed by the millennial *murshid* on social media is prayer beads, which are “a reminder tool” for dhikr.<sup>26</sup> Tasbih is a tool for dhikr to the Sufis' main activity. Therefore, the tasbih is closely attached to the life of the Sufi to remember God continually. The symbolic virtual reinforcement by the millennial *murshid* emphasizes that Sufism still always exists in all developments. Sufism reproduction with symbolic aspects is a form of response in self-actualization on global social media. Symbolic identity strengthens Sufism's existence in social media.<sup>27</sup>

The virtual Sufism is conducted by the millennial *murshid* to actualize Sufism which is adjusted to virtual developments. The symbolic attributes of Sufism are aimed at showing that Sufism identity is different from conventional Sufism identity, which only exists in a real space, which in most instances is limited. Contrarily, social media has unlimited space and it propagates Sufism identity. However, the virtual strengthening of identity reduces the meaning of its symbolic aspect since the deeper meaning of “Sufism” cannot be perceived. Broader Sufism entities are more focused on aspects of spiritual esoterism.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the virtual strengthening of the symbolic identity is a strategy to revive Sufism globally.

<sup>24</sup> Hidayat, *Kuasa Kelas Bawah dan Bisnis Berkah di Makam Wali*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Paulo G. Pinto, “Mystical Metaphors: Ritual, Symbols and Self in Syrian Sufism”, *Culture and Religion* 18, 2 (2017), 90-109; Thierry Zarcone, “L'habit de Symboles des Derviches Tourneurs”, *Journal of the History of Sufism* 6 (2015), 47-76.

<sup>26</sup> Younes Saramifar, “Crafting Sacrality from the Tensile Life of Objects Learning about the Material Life Prayer Beads from A Khaksari Sufi Murshid”, *Contemporary Islam* 12 (2018), 39-55.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with A.S. Rajagukguk, 23 November 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Eric Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme: Histoire, Fondements et Pratiques de l'Islam Spirituel* (Eyrolles, 2019), 12.

The activities carried out by the millennial *murshid* become part of the formation of religiosity in society, making virtual Sufism a new ritual with a socio-religious legitimacy related to *murshid's* creativity to self-actualize. The various Sufism symbolic attributes assert that *murshids* are holders of spiritual authority.<sup>29</sup> The Socio-religious legitimacy is seen as a significant effort to facilitate the acceptance of Sufism on social media. Virtual Sufism is carried out in cyberspace by following continuing developments, specifically among millennials. It virtually presents Sufism to strengthen its identity in the arena where a lot of contention is continuing to counter Sufism.<sup>30</sup>

Virtual Sufism is also carried out through facial expressions displayed during ritual prayer, remembrance, suluk, and others (Rajaguguk, 12 December 2019). Its activity, which cannot be separated from various rituals taught in the *ṭarīqah*, is conducted to achieve the spiritual milestone. It also introduces Sufism activities practiced in the daily lives of Sufis to the global community. This step is carried out to introduce and teach about Sufism rituals in the community, specifically among millennials who are virtually connected.<sup>31</sup> Varied opinions regarding how the millennial *murshids* should evaluate Sufism are evident. Some believe that Sufism as a “lonely world” road cannot be displayed only in symbolic form since it might cause disfunction, while others understand self-Sufism as an effort to bring Sufism virtually.

The practice of virtual Sufism provides a symbolic meaning to the status and images presented in social media. This practice is conducted privately but reproduced in social media to give meaning to the community. Society has various ways of evaluating rituals shown by the millennial *murshid*. Therefore, virtual Sufism should present relevant Sufism expressions in a global society perspective through social media.<sup>32</sup> This practice is carried out in rituals directly related to *ṭarīqah*. The attributes of Sufism are also developed in the broader context, especially by utilizing its elements as a tool of social legitimacy in society to help build and maintain user relationships. It also helps

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<sup>29</sup> Ziaulhaq Hidayat, “Kekuasaan Spiritual dalam Kerajaan Tuhan: Struktur Sosial dan Otoritas Mursyid dalam Tarekat Naqsyabandiyah-Khalidiyah Babussalam (TNKB)”, *Jurnal Medan Agama* 2, 1 (2015), 22-39.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with A.S. Rajaguguk, 23 November 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

their development through receiving support from organizations in the community.

Relationships with multiple organizations have strengthened the millennial *murshid* position because it is said to have its role in people's lives. For instance, it has given vast space as a form of legitimacy in Sufism activities carried out. Furthermore, it requires the participation of religious organizations in recognition of the existence of the millennial *murshids* as spiritual leaders. In social relations, the millennial *murshid* receives support in terms of self-strengthening in the empirical and virtual worlds to be widely accepted and recognized by the public.<sup>33</sup> The legitimacy of spiritual authority is seen in the relationships that the millennial *murshids* have built. The ability of the millennial *murshids* to build power relations points explicitly to the existence of *murshids* believed to have spiritual authority and strong societal ties. The millennial *murshid* relationship with the holders of power is two-way. The holders of power are interested in maintaining their status and propagating the existence of the upper-class group in the social structure.<sup>34</sup> These relationship ties are aimed at legitimizing each other in an attempt to strengthen spiritual authority. Power groups use the relations as part of building a good image in the community.<sup>35</sup>

Various individuals, including state officials, business people, media owners, and others, are the ruling group. The relationship between the *murshid* and the power holders offers political legitimacy to the existence of a *ṭarīqah* supported by the lower-class groups and the upper-class who have significant influence in society. The relation of reciprocal power influences the strengthening of the identity of the *ṭarīqah* as a spiritual institution. Legitimacy through power relations provides broad recognition from the elite in a bid to strengthen the existence of the *ṭarīqah* in a global society. Furthermore, power

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<sup>33</sup> Fait Muedini, *Sponsoring Sufism: How Governments Promote "Mystical Islam" in Their Domestic and Foreign Policies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 10; Michael Gilson, *Connaissance de l'Islam* (Paris: Karthala, 2001), 214.

<sup>34</sup> Ziaulhaq Hidayat, "Legitimasi Politik di Makam Tuan Guru: Perilaku Ziarah Politisi Lokal ke Tarekat Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam (INB)", *Jurnal al-Tajfeir* 7, 1 (2014), 33-46; Rachida Chih, "Sainteté, Maître Spirituelle et Patronage: Les Fondements de l'Autorité dans le Soufisme", *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 49, 125 (2004), 79-98.

<sup>35</sup> Hidayat, "Peran Sufi Batak dalam Persaudaraan Lintas Iman di Tanah Batak, 312.

relations in social media are expressed in the form of images through Facebook to confirm that the millennial *murshid* has a strategic position in the community.<sup>36</sup>

The millennial *murshids* need to maintain relationships with traditional leaders. This enables them to reinforce their existence by relating well with customary leaders and, as a result, obtain legitimacy. The millennial *murshid* is a part of Batak ethnicity, which means that close contact with the local culture strengthens relations with traditional leaders within the community to help popularize “Tuan Batak Guru” (TGB). The expression of power relations with traditional leaders shows that Sufism adapts well to the local culture to become an integral part of the local culture. Therefore, the mutual relationship among the holders of power, leaders, and the millennial *murshid* has helped to bring out the face of Sufism that is acceptable to all people.

### **Virtual Piety: The Millennial *Murshid*'s Expression of Piety**

Sufism has intersected with social media to form a new expression of piety, called virtual piety. This is a form of religiousness in the virtual world, which contrasts with the conventional expressions of piety practiced by previous Sufi groups. Virtual piety in cyberspace tends to adapt to all forms of development and changes that may occur. Displaying oneself and the environment in a favorable light has become necessary for many people in the virtual community. In addition, Sufism has also intersected with social media, creating a virtual space in which pious expression can take place. This has included adopting all forms of development in cyberspace.

The expression of Sufism on social media involves individualized and “hidden” conventional piety reinterpretation. The conventional piety personal matters cannot foster a spirit of public piety because it is conducted and enjoyed by individuals. Therefore, the millennial *murshid* holds that pure piety must be relevant to evolving needs to inspire the public. The efforts to reinterpret the meaning of piety from individuals to the public involve efforts to “live” Sufism in global life. This effort rejects the general view that Sufism is a form of religious expression that “ignores” all piety activities from the public. Therefore, the reinterpretation of piety following the life changes and developments is

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with A.S. Rajagukguk, 20 December 2019.

part of the effort to actualize Sufism globally.<sup>37</sup> The virtual world creates openness, besides eliminating distance, which is a reality that cannot be denied.

The millennial *murshid* is aware that Sufism is not an empty world without anything interesting. Actualization efforts to bring Sufism participation in social media is a form of response to the reality of contemporary life. In practice, what the millennial *murshids* perform is not yet entirely acceptable to all sections of society, specifically Sufism practitioners and sympathizers. This section of people believes that the world of Sufism is a “silent world” of expressions.<sup>38</sup> The expression shown by the millennial *murshid* is considered a contravention of the tradition of Sufism and has “come out” of Sufism itself. Furthermore, presenting Sufism virtually as conducted by the millennial *murshids* is considered as a form of disorientation that displays more symbolic aspects than substantive Sufism.

The reinterpretation of piety by the millennial *murshids* departs from efforts to understand that Sufism expresses diversity as opposed to individual piety, and the practice of Sufi piety is universal, including piety in public spaces. Furthermore, the specific ritual practice has implications for individual piety because they are carried out for personal interests. The millennial *murshid* reinterpreted piety not only in the privacy space, but it must also give color to public piety. Various expressions of Sufism, specifically the use of Facebook to reinterpret piety, are not only for individual interests but also to show its implications for the formation of public piety.<sup>39</sup>

The efforts to reinterpret piety conducted by the millennial *murshid* have various consequences on Sufism. For instance, presenting Sufism in the public sphere will have implications for strengthening the symbolic Sufism, which is deemed to neglect the substantial elements of Sufism itself. Moreover, realizing Sufism in open space, specifically in social media, will form a virtual piety different from “real Sufism.” The virtual space becomes an expression room for Sufism, which is

<sup>37</sup> Interview with A.S. Rajagukguk, 23 November 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Hill, “Sufism between Past and Modernity”, Mark Woodward and Ronald Lukens-Bull, ed., *Handbook of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Lives* (Netherlands: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 1-26; Martin van Bruinessen, “Sufism, Popular Islam and the Encounter with Modernity”, Muhammad Khalid Masud (ed.), *Islam and Modernity: Key Issues and Debates* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 125-157.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with A.S. Rajagukguk, 20 December 2019.

more symbolic because it only produces a form of Sufism with no spiritual value. Additionally, the expression of virtual piety is considered different from the identity of “real Sufism” because Sufism in the conventional sense is understood as real. The reintegration efforts of virtual piety lack the support of old *murshids*, specifically groups with traditional spiritual authority who are not familiar with the information technology development. The old *murshid* groups retain popular expressions of Sufism in the form of “real Sufism”.<sup>40</sup>

Virtual piety is an affirmation that piety is not only rigid but also dynamic following the continuing developments. According to the millennial *murshid*, when an event takes place as a reality, there is no choice but to follow the progress by taking part on it.<sup>41</sup> Virtual piety is an option to actualize Sufism virtually because real piety in the conventional sense cannot represent Sufism that is ready for global development. The actualization of Sufism with virtual piety is part of an effort to understand piety relevant to development. Virtual piety is different from the conventional piety, which is “closed” to life realities to the extent that it cannot shape global piety. Virtual piety is intended to color life with the value of virtual mysticism.

Virtual piety, which expresses the millennial *murshid*, places Sufism in cyberspace, specifically the symbolic aspect confirms that piety is interpreted as something the public knows. Virtual piety displayed on social media has formed a meaning that piety must be known to the public. While being spiritual is more individual, social media space used to express virtual piety exposes it to the public. In practice, virtual piety is an affirmation of spiritual identity in a global spiritual movement.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, virtual piety links the tradition of popular Sufism with the rise of virtual Sufism. The millennial *murshid* Facebook status shows that the efforts to reconstruct Sufism are part of contemporary religious legitimacy. This is because the Facebook status

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<sup>40</sup> Mouloud Haddad, “Zawiya Réelle, Zawiya Virtuelle: Soufisme, Francophonie et Nouvelles Technologies ou Québec”, *Globe: Revue Internationale d'Etudes Québécoises* 11, 1 (2018), 197-208; Francesco Piraini, “Between Real and Virtual Communities Sufism in Western Societies and the Naqshabandi Haqqani Case”, *Social Compass* 63, 1 (2016), 94.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with A.S. Rajagukguk, 23 November 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Deepak Sardana, et.al., “Spirituality and Religiosity at the Junction of Consumerism: Exploring Consumer Preference for Spiritual Brands”, *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 42, 6 (2018), 724-735; Irene Becci and Christophe Monnot, “Spiritualité et Religion: Nouveaux Carburants vers la Transition Énergétique?”, *Histoire, Monde et Culture Religieuses* 40, 4 (2016), 93-109.

and the accompanying picture are considered as attempts from spiritual authority and power relations to make it more visible than Sufism.

The practice of Sufism on social media is undoubtedly contradictory to conventional Sufism.<sup>43</sup> Conventional Sufism makes piety a form of individual life practice, which is shelved from the public. In contrast, the millennial *murshid* seeks to “shift” from individual to public in the form of virtual piety. The millennial *murshid* self-exploration observes that Sufism behavior “enjoys” in “real Sufism practices” and in cyberspace through virtual piety. Therefore, actualizing Sufism in cyberspace through social media is part of global life.

The presence of virtual piety on social media is supported by the millennial *murshid* view that traditional spiritual Sufism in Islam will adapt to social media. Virtual piety shows that Sufism is not anti-progress, and at the same time, it offsets all forms of distortion about Sufism experienced in global community life practices. The various Sufism expressions and spirituality developed on social media are part of connecting the spiritual world as a “lonely road” with virtual life. Therefore, the various display forms shown by the millennial *murshid*, including bay’at, dhikr, tawajuh, and others, are generally carried out in conventional *tariqah* the same way they are conducted online.

The various activities related to Sufism, including doctrines and rituals show that virtual piety has the ability to inspire some virtual communities.<sup>44</sup> Virtual piety is strengthened by legitimacy obtained by young *murshids* from multiple groups, as stated earlier. Therefore, the virtual piety expression displayed is likely to attract the sympathy of some groups to become part of the *tariqah* practitioners, specifically the millennial generation and social media activists. The expression of virtual piety that emphasizes the symbolic aspect seeks to maintain various attributes associated with the piety.

Virtual piety practice on social media refers to the spiritual aspects that have been constructed using cyberspace devices. Virtual piety is manifested in the form of images or videos showing the connection

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<sup>43</sup> Luthfi Makhasin, “Urban Sufism, Media and Religious Change in Indonesia”, *Ijtima’iyya: Journal of Muslim Society Research* 1, 1 (2016), 23-35; Michael Laffan, “From Alternative Medicine to National Cure: Another Voice for the Sufi Orders in the Indonesian Media”, *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 135 (2006), 91-115.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with A.S. Rajagukguk, 23 November 2019.

between humans and God. The aspect of virtualization becomes important in forming new Sufism expressions in cyberspace through social media that is open to all.<sup>45</sup> All forms of virtual piety are introduced in social media, and at the same time, constructed to show that Sufism does not only take place in the real world but has also available in cyberspace. The social media domain has made it easier to visualize piety since it allows the use of symbols, which makes manipulation easier. Various conventional Sufism groups criticize virtualization attempts by stating that they will not achieve the essential Sufism goals.

The social media Sufism actualization has given a new insight to the efforts to form public piety through Sufism life. The concerted energy has shifted the “sacred area” of Sufism to what can be seen and understood by the broader community as a form of virtual piety general practice. Additionally, the move to introduce Sufism activities has given a new meaning to the Sufism global community practices, implying that Sufism can be studied openly.<sup>46</sup> Referring to the practice of Sufism, the doctrines, rituals, and spiritual activities in Sufism are “closed” but rather open to global society.

## Conclusion

The social capital owned by the millennial *murshid* group, which comprises spiritual leaders and the millennial generation, has greatly promoted Sufism identity in social media. As a result, the efforts to use social media for spiritual activities helped to actualize Sufism in the global society. Furthermore, the actualization of Sufism in cyberspace has been enhanced by the millennial *murshid* generation of heavy social media users. The intersection of sufism and social media has its origin from the attempts by virtual Sufism” to become the main identity by utilizing the symbols of Sufism attributes, such as pointed lobes, robes, prayer beads, and others, which are after strengthening Sufism identity on social media. The Sufism identity depicted in social media legitimizes the spiritual authority with various groups, including

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<sup>45</sup> Fatimah Husein and Martin Slama, “Online Pious and it’s Discontent: Revitising Islamic Anxieties on Indonesian Social Media”, *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, 134 (2018), 80-93; Paul K. McClure, “Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age: The Effects of Social Networking Sites on the Religious Beliefs of Emerging Adults”, *Sociological Perspectives* 4, 59 (2016), 818-832.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with A.S. Rajagukguk, 23 November 2019.



religious organizations, power holders, and traditional leaders. Overall, the expression of Sufism in cyberspace has the sole mandate to realize virtual piety that is likely as opposed to individual piety. Virtual piety, which is the result of the intersection of Sufism with social media has formed a new expression of piety that does not only mean individual piety but also public piety that involves the community. Finally, although most groups practicing Sufism do not accept virtual piety, as a result of the intersection of Sufism with social media, it becomes a part that must be recognized as a reality that exists in a cyber society. On the other hand, virtual piety has resulted in the simplification of piety from the Sufism tradition. []

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