AGAINST RELIGIOUS FORMALISM
The Dynamics of Young Urban Sufism in Yogyakarta

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Abstract: This article discusses two elements of the evolution of Sufism amongst young urbanites. First, it explores the dynamics of the youths who are actively involved in spiritual activities at cafés, councils, and *pesantren* in Yogyakarta. Second, it investigates their response to the religious formalism promoted by Salafist organizations. Such spirituality offers a means of enriching religious perspectives and discourses. At the same time, urban Sufism (as promoted by *zikir* groups, prayer groups, and *pesantren*) has been challenged by Islamic organizations that adhere to doctrines of Salafism/Wahhabism and transnational Islamism. This study employs a qualitative approach by collecting its data through observations and interviews with urban Sufis in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. It finds that youths' opposition is not only to religious formalism produced by Salafists but also to formality and exclusivity known as brotherhoodism or *tariqa* (Sufi order) from Sufi itself. Their strict opposition to the dualism of religious formality provides them with an important means of critiquing the dominant strains of *tasawwuf* and religious schools (*tariqa*) while offering new religious dynamics.

Keywords: Sufism, young sufism, urban sufism, religious formalism.

Introduction

The rise of *zikir* (recitation) and prayer groups that convey spiritual and religious messages through prayer recitations and discussions of Sufi leaders and traditions has influenced the religious dynamics of Indonesia's major cities, including Yogyakarta. Sufi activities, known collectively as urban Sufism, have found fertile ground in Indonesia and dynamically influenced the religious

experiences of urban society[1] and across the globe.[2] Urban Sufism offers a new perspective for understanding the diverse religious practices and perspectives of urban society. Initially, urban Sufism was understood as the particular religious activities of the urban middle classes[3] who have increasingly influenced the narratives and discourses of Islam in Indonesia.[4]

Youths have played an important role in the rise of urban Sufism, and understanding this role offers them a means of comprehensively understanding the dynamic development of religion in urban society.[5] Urban Sufism, thus, has offered new dynamics and possibilities for expressing Islam in a contextual manner that reflects the real needs and conditions of society.[6] At the same time, the demographic bonus experienced by Indonesia—in 2019, youths represented 24.01% of the country's population[7]—has significantly colored its urban society's religious practices and expressions. Given their significant population, urban youths have been targeted by diverse religious and non-religious groups to advance their interests and agendas.

Historically, Sufism has been an integral part of Islamic practices, both in Indonesia in general and in Java in particular. This can be seen, for example, in the continued influence of the Wali Songo into the 20th century.[8] These men, the "nine saints" of Indonesian Islam,

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[1] Rubaidi, "The Role of Urban Sufism of Shalawat Muhammad Assembly on Urban Middle Class Society," *Jurnal Ushuluddin* 26, 2 (2018), p. 183, https://doi.org/10.24-014/jush.v26i2.4895.

[2] Carl Morris, "'Look into the Book of Life': Muslim Musicians, Sufism and Postmodern Spirituality in Britain," *Social Compass* 63, 3 (2016): pp. 389–404, https://doi.-org/10.1177/0037768616652333.

[3] Yusdani Yusdani et al., "Yogyakarta Urban Middle-Class Sufism: Economic, Political and Cultural Networks," *Ulumuna* 23, 2 (2020): pp. 266–93, https://doi.org/10.20-414/ujis.v23i2.342.

[4] Julia Day Howell, "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival," *Journal of Asian Studies* 60, 3 (2001): pp. 701–29.

[5] Atif Khalil and Shiraz Sheikh, "Sufism in Western Historiography: A Brief Overview," *Philosophy East and West* 66, 1 (2016): pp. 194–217.

[6] Catharina Raudvere and Leif Stenberg, *Sufism Today: Heritage and Tradition in the Global Community* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

[7] Badan Pusat Statistik, "Statistik Pemuda Indonesia 2019" (Jakarta, 2019).

[8] Syamsun Ni'am, "Pesantren: The Miniature of Moderate Islam in Indonesia," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 5, 1 (2015): pp. 111–34, https://doi.-org/10.18326/ijims.v5i1.111-134.

played a monumental role in the Islamization of the archipelago. Indeed, Sufi teachings played an integral role in Indonesian opposition to colonialism,[9] whose role is quite similar to that of providing a medium for social movements in Turkey.[10] Over time, Sufism evolved, becoming what has been variously termed neo-Sufism,[11] modern *tasawwuf*,[12] Sufi-like,[13] and urban Sufism,[14] and provided a model for religious activities in urban society. However, although the topic has been explored in discussions of the Moroccan Youth Go Sufi[15] as well as by Simonsen[16] and Ahmadi, [17] few scholars have investigated young Sufism in Indonesia.

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[9] Achmad Ubaedillah, "Sufi Islam and the Nation State: Darul Arkam Movement in the Post Suharto Era of Indonesia," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 5, 1 (2015): pp. 79–110, https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v5i1.79-110.

[10] Alexandre Papas, "Toward a New History of Sufism: The Turkish Case," *History of Religions* 46, 1 (2006): pp. 81–90.

[11] Julia D. Howell "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival," *Journal of Asian Studies* 60, 3 (2001): pp. 701–29; also read John O . Voll, "Neo-Sufism: Reconsidered Again," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 42, 2 (2008): pp. 314–30.

[12] Biyanto, "The Typology of Muhammadiyah Sufism: Tracing Its Figures' Thoughts and Exemplary Lives," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 7, 2 (2017): pp. 221–49, https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v7i2.221-249.

[13] Achmad Zainal Arifin, "From Magics, Dances, to Cafés: The Role of Sufism in Constructing Identity among the Urban Youth," *Atlantis Press*, 339 (2019), pp. 166–69, https://doi.org/10.2991/aicosh-19.2019.35.

[14] Ken Miichi, "Urban Sufi and Politics in Contemporary Indonesia: The Role of Dhikr Associations in the Anti-'Ahok' Rallies," *South East Asia Research* 27, 3 (2019): pp. 225–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2019.1667110; Bryan S. Turner and Oscar Salemink, "Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia," in Bryan Turner and Oscar Salemink (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia* (2015), pp. 1–449, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315758534; Julia Day Howell, "Sufism on the Silver Screen: Indonesian Innovations in Islamic Televangelism," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 2, 2 (2008): pp. 225–39, https://doi.org/10.15642/jiis.2008.2.2.225-239; Howell "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival; Dadi Darmadi, "Urban Sufism: The New Flourishing Vivacity of Contemporary Indonesian Islam," *Studia Islamika* 8, 1 (2001): pp. 205–10, https://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v8i1.700.

[15] Khalid Bekkaoui and Ricardo René Larémont, "Moroccan Youth Go Sufi," *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 2, 1 (2011): pp. 31–46, https://doi.org/10.1080/2152084-4.2011.565711.

[16] Jørgen Bæk Simonsen, "Youth and Youth Culture in the Contemporary Middle East," in Jørgen Bæk Simonsen (ed), *Youth and Youth Culture in the Contemporary Middle East* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2005).

The term urban Sufism was introduced by Julia Day Howell—and subsequently used by scholars such as Nurani,[18] Makhasin,[19] and Darmadi[20]—to understand the rise of Sufism amongst the urban middle classes. Genealogically, urban Sufism can be traced back to neo-Sufism,[21] a movement used by religious thinkers such as Abû Hâmid al-Ghazâlî, Suhrawardî al-Maqtûl, and al-Qushayrî as a critique of classical Sufism. At its essence, neo-Sufism rejects the teachings of classical Sufism, particularly those of *wahdat al-wujûd* (unity of being)*, ittihâd* (union)*, hulûl* (incarnation)*,* and *wahdat al-adyân.*[22] The rapid rise of urban Sufism in Indonesia belies the claim, made by social scientists such as Ernest Gellner and Clifford Geertz, that Sufism is predominantly a *rural phenomenon,*[23] being marked by aestheticism and illiteracy.[24] Indeed, more extremely, Gellner even argued that Sufism was a popular tradition that would fade as society became increasingly modernized.[25] Such claims have been proven false, as modern society has seen the rise of increasingly diverse organizations that approach Sufism in their own manner.[26]

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[17] Fereshteh Ahmadi, "Reflections on Spiritual Maturity and Gerotranscendence: Dialogues with Two Sufis," *Journal of Religious Gerontology* 11, 2 (2000): pp. 43–74, https://doi.org/10.1300/J078v11n02_04.

[18] Shinta Nurani, "Urban Sufism and Transformation of Islamic Culture In Millenial Society," *Religia* 169 (2018), p. 158, https://doi.org/10.28918/religia.v21i2.1508.

[19] Luthfi Makhasin, "Urban Sufism, Media and Religious Change in Indonesia," *Ijtima'iyya: Journal of Muslim Society Research* 1, 1 (2016): pp. 23–36, https://doi.org/10.24090/ijtimaiyya.v1i1.925.

[20] Darmadi, "Urban Sufism: The New Flourishing Vivacity of Contemporary Indonesian Islam."

[21] Julia Day Howell, "Introduction: Sufism and Neo-Sufism in Indonesia Today," *RIMA: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 46, 2 (2012): pp. 1–24.

[22] Julia Day Howell and Martin van Bruinessen, "Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam," in Julia Day Howell and Martin van Bruinessen (eds), *Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755607983.ch-001.

[23] Julia Day Howell, "Indonesia's Urban Sufis: Challenging Stereotypes of Islamic Revival," *ISIM Newsletter* 6, (2000), p. 1.

[24] Howell and Bruinessen, "Sufism 'Modern' Islam."

[25] Darmadi, "Urban Sufism: The New Flourishing Vivacity of Contemporary Indonesian Islam."

[26] Pnina Werbner, "Seekers on the Path: Different Ways of Being a Sufi in Britain," in Jarnal Malik and John Hinnells (eds), *Sufism in the West* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203087206.

This article presents the dynamics of urban Sufism amongst youths in Yogyakarta, as well as young Sufis' views regarding the religious practices promoted by Salafism and similar schools of Islam. This study employs a qualitative research approach, with data collected through participatory observation between 2019 and 2022. The researchers observed and participated in activities sponsored by urban Sufis in various cafés in Yogyakarta, particularly those owned by Edi Mulyono (Basabasi, Mainmain, and Lehaleha). During this process, the researchers participated in *zikir* and worship activities, thereby obtaining an understanding of the dynamic development of urban Sufism amongst young Muslims in Yogyakarta. After being collected through participatory observation, documentation, and in-depth interviews with nine informants, data were categorized by content and verified through triangulation. All nine informants were active participants in *zikir* and worship activities in Yogyakarta.

The Dynamics of Urban Sufism

Urban Sufism practiced by the youths of Yogyakarta has faced pressures from proponents of formalist groups, who have expressed their opposition to Sufism and its practices.[27] The formalization of Islam (and Islamic law) has been perceived as a means of ensuring that Muslims adhere to a specific interpretation of Islamic law.[28] In legal studies, formalism is often understood in a technical sense, being a means through which legal practitioners understand the procedural rules as best reflecting the spirit of the rules.[29] Such a paradigm relies on formal standards for legal certainty, rather than considering other means of understanding legal phenomena.[30] In practice, religious formalism refers to specific rules that must be obeyed as written textually. Formalism creates its own particular boundaries, violations of which will result in sanctions (moral, social, or positive/legal) that

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[27] Mark Woodward et al., "Salafi Violence and Sufi Tolerance? Rethinking Conventional Wisdom," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, 6 (2013): pp. 58–78.

[28] Rahmatunnair, "Paradigma Formalisasi Hukum Islam Di Indonesia," *AHKAM : Jurnal Ilmu Syariah* 12, 1 (2012): pp. 99–108, https://doi.org/10.15408/ajis.v12i1.984.

[29] Laura Pineschi, *General Principles of Law -The Role of the Judiciary* (Cham: Springer, 2015).

[30] Jean D'Aspremont, *Formalism and the Sources of International Law: A Theory of the Ascertainment of Legal Rules* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199696314.001.0001.

are strictly prescribed by contention and law.[31] Within the context of the state, religious formalism takes two forms, involving either political formalism (existing as a state project that is manifested in positive law) or non-political formalism (as seen, for example, in the mechanisms through which the *pesantren* operated by the Nahdlatul Ulama [NU] create consensuses [*fiqh* and *fatwas*] using discourse and debate).[32]

When it occurs in the political sphere, religious formalism often manifests as the Islamization of law, wherein Islamic doctrines are used as the basis of *sharia* laws and enforced with sanctions prescribed by State law. Such religious formalism has emerged due to the pressures of modernization and the perceived marginalization of Islam and religious authorities (i.e., *ulamas* and other religious scholars).[33] Here, however, formalism must be understood more generally, involving not only positive law but also all aspects of the Islamic revival.[34] Much of it is formal, rather than substantial, being reflected in practitioners' everyday dress and behavior. Because Indonesia does not use Islamic law as the basis of its constitution or most of its legislation, corpus, calls for religious formalism may be understood *ius constituendum*—as fundamental legal goals that are being pursued by Islamists within the State. Indeed, in some cases, Islamic law has been used to guide positive law, as seen in the decisions of the religious court system that is regulated through Law No. 7 of 1989.[35]

Activities of urban Sufism has been open to the public and even broadcast online. This can be seen, for example, in the Maulana Rumi Pesantren in Sewon, Bantul, which has used innovative technological

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[31] Wael B. Hallaq, *Authority, Continuity, and Change in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Wael B. Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Wael B. Hallaq, *Shari'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[32] Achmad Kemal Riza, "Contemporary Fatawa of Nahdlatul Ulama Between Observing the Madhhab and Adapting the Context," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 5, 1 (2011); Nadirsyah Hosen, "Nahdlatul Ulama and Collective Ijtihad," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 6 (2004): pp. 5–26.

[33] A.C. Hemerijck, "Dynamism in Islamic Activism," *Dynamism in Islamic Activism* (Amsterdam, 2006), https://doi.org/10.5117/9789053569184.

[34] Anton Minardi, "The New Islamic Revivalism in Indonesia Accommodationist and Confrontationist," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 12, 2 (2018): pp. 247–64, https://doi.org/-10.15642/JIIS.2018.12.2.247-264.

[35] MB Hooker and Tim Lindsey, "Public Faces of Shari'ah Tn Contemporary Indonesia: Towards a National Madhhab," *Studia Islamika* 10, 1 (2003).

approaches to disseminate its *da'wah* messages. At this *pesantren*, all activities—both those held on-campus and those held elsewhere—are simultaneously live-streamed by Kuswaidi Syafi'ie (the founder of the *pesantren*) through his personal Facebook account.[36] These online media activities enable the *pesantren* to disseminate its spiritual activities, thereby providing a virtual means of interacting with youths. Such use of information technology has provided urban Sufism with a space in which it has grown rapidly. At the same time, the physical presence of Kuswaidi Syafi'ie has provided an important means of ensuring the continued survival of the community.

The Maulana Rumi Pesantren in Sewon, Bantul, offers a model of a worship community that uses *salawatan*, *mujahadah*, discussions of sacred texts (such as those by Jalaluddin Rumi and Ibnu Arabi), and other similar activities. Kiai Kuswaidi Syafi'ie, the founder and leader of this *pesantren*, also contributes to other worship activities throughout Yogyakarta. Since its establishment in early 2012, this *pesantren* has expanded to include a dance troupe (*whirling dervishes*) and a musical group named Anggur Maulana Rumi. It has thus become widely known amongst millennials throughout the city, especially those seeking to learn *tasawwuf*. Taking advantage of the discussion spaces and literary communities that have become cornerstones of Yogyakartan youth culture, urban Sufis have sought to offer the broadest possible opportunities to worshippers of diverse backgrounds. Such activities have been targeted primarily at youths and adapted for local contexts. Yogyakarta is known as a student city, and indeed students can readily be found at the city's campuses, cafés, and worship sites. Such cornerstones of youth life have become cornerstones of worship and sufi activities.

In Indonesia, urban Sufism has emerged as a means of mobilizing social piety and shaping public understandings. Over time, urban Sufis have creatively revised and adapted their strategies, using mechanisms akin to those described by Julia Howell in *Sufism on The Silver Screen*. Howell noted that televangelists such as Abdullah Gymnastiar and M. Arifin Ilham have played an important role in the creation and promotion of Sufi forms of piety.[37] At the same time, cities

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[36] Kuswaidi Syafiie's FB account https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100006796668730 (accessed on November 10, 2022)

[37] Howell, "Sufism on the Silver Screen: Indonesian Innovations in Islamic Televangelism."

throughout Indonesia have seen the rise of *zikir* and *salawat* groups that provide urban Sufis with the spaces necessary to innovatively spread their practices and organizational ideas.[38] Almost every major city has its own *zikir* councils, using an approach that has been described by Arif Zamhari and Julia D Howell as *"taking Sufism to the streets"*.[39] In these activities, *zikir* and *salawat* activities have played a central role in the creation of piety and dissemination of Sufi teachings.

From Places of Worship to Cafés

The communal and worship activities of urban Sufis have advanced rapidly in cafés, where they have directly targeted youths. Through their routine worship activities, held at cafés such as Basabasi, Mainmain, and Lehaleha, Kiai Kuswaidi Syafi'ie and his followers have acted as pioneers in this process. The owner of these cafés, Edi Mulyono, also welcomed amenable speakers such as Ulil Abshar Abdalla (February 4, 2018, February 21, 2019, and September 1, 2020) and Husein Ja'far Al Hadar (September 7, 2019, October 25, 2021, and November 23, 2021).

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[38] Arif Zamhari, *Rituals of Islamic Spirituality : A Study of Majlis Dhikr Groups in East Java*, *Rituals of Islamic Spirituality : A Study of Majlis Dhikr Groups in East Java* (2010), https://doi.org/10.26530/oapen_459498.

[39] Arif Zamhari and Julia Day Howell, "Taking Sufism to the Streets: 'Majelis Zikir' and 'Majelis Salawat' as New Venues for Popular Islamic Piety in Indonesia," *RIMA: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 46, 2 (2012): pp. 47–75.

A commemoration of Maulid Nabi at Basabasi café, October 25, 2021i;
screenshot from the YouTube channel BasabasiTV

The owner of these cafés used these activities to promote a friendly and peaceful understanding of Islam, and it is through this support that activities have been conducted fruitfully. They have instigated a significant shift in the practices of urban Sufis, ensuring that all activities are readily accessible to the public—including those with little experience in matters of Sufism and spirituality. *Salawatan* and worship activities are broadcast openly, providing the public with new insight into the practices of urban Sufis.[40] The activities of urban Sufis in cafés highlight their increasing openness and dynamicity, through which they have offered new spaces for their religious rituals and traditions. Their commitment to spreading *da'wah* through cafés, which nota bene are better known as sites of worldly entertainment, has promoted a breakthrough in the entertainment industry in Yogyakarta. This is recognized by Syafi'ie as facilitating youths' access to activities that can fulfill their spiritual needs (interview with Kuswaidi Syafi'ie, Yogyakarta, March 10, 2021).

Generally, cafés are viewed as symbols of consumerism and hedonism, places where urbanites interact with each other. Through the communal worship activities of urban Sufis, however, cafés have become integral parts of spiritual practice. There is a paradox here,

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[40] Arifin, "From Magics, Dances, to Cafés: The Role of Sufism in Constructing Identity among the Urban Youth."

wherein the practices and ideals of urban Sufism are introduced and popularized amongst youths through symbols of urban living. For Moh. Arif Arifin, the decision to move away from traditional places of worship (such as *langgar*) to cafés is viewed as embracing "a new medium for conveying the teachings and values of *tasawwuf* in a manner that is familiar to youths. Even though the process may be slower due to the reduced frequency and intensity of meetings, this is good as an introductory step." (Interview with Moh. Arif Arifin, Yogyakarta, January 21, 2020)

At first, the rise of *tasawwuf* and other Sufi activities was perceived as strange, as traditionally Sufism has been promoted through rituals in which individuals distance themselves from the hustle and bustle of society.[41] Worship and other activities were conducted in *langar* and *pesantren*, quite similar to that of *tekke*, spaces popular amongst the dervishes of Turkey.[42] In early 2017, when the Basabasi Café was first built in Sorowajan, Banguntapan, Bantul, spiritual activities were conducted by Cak Kus (as Kiai Kuswaidi Syafi'ie is popularly known) to introduce the works of Sufis such as Jalaluddin Rumi and Imam Busyiri. Rathor Rozi, a faithful follower of Maulana Rumi's activities at Basabasi Café, described the early stages of the process:

> At first, I didn't feel that it was right for me, as *tasawwuf* activities should ideally be conducted in special places such as mosques and pesantren. However, over time, I realized the error of my ways, and saw that Cak Kus was doing a great job of familiarizing youths with religious beliefs in spaces that were long considered simply places for entertainment." (Interview with Rathor Rozi, Yogyakarta, January 23, 2020).

The influence of traditional Sufi views, however, did not disappear, especially amongst those with prior experience with Sufi teachings. Traditional Sufism has relied on order and discipline, wherein students of Sufism were expected to follow particular schools of thought when shaping their understandings. Discipline and self-control were required to patiently follow religious teachings and bring oneself closer to God. The peak of Sufism could only be achieved by improving oneself and

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Rosemary Corbett, *Making Moderate Islam: Sufism, Service, and the "Ground Zero Mosque" Controversy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfx068; Mustafa Kara, "Tekke E¤itimi ve Literatürü," *Türkiye Arafl›rmalar› Literatür Dergisi* 6, 12 (2008): pp. 107–38.

bringing oneself closer to the Almighty (Interview with Mohammad Ali Fakih, Yogyakarta, January 21, 2020).

As such, there was an essential awareness of the need to provide youths with an understanding of Sufism that could be understood without going through the so-called "formal approaches" to it. Youths had to be provided with the freedom to learn and study on their own, to select their preferred topics and understand Sufism rationally by testing it, responding to it, and exploring its world. Khariyanto, a former *santri* (student) at Maulana Rumi, expressed an appreciation for Kuswaidi Syafi'ie's approach to introducing Sufi teachings to urban youths:

> Cak Kus' approach, doing *tasawwuf* in cafés and other places where young people gather, attracted them as participants and introduced them to *tasawwuf* on a massive scale. I can't deny that this shift in teaching Sufism, what we can call neo-Sufism, is a consequence of the modern era. Furthermore, *tariqa* have the potential to become exclusive and treat themselves as the most correct. Such approaches are not acceptable according to the teachings of *tasawwuf*." (Interview with Khariyanto, Yogyakarta, January 23, 2020).

By conducting these activities openly, without requiring *tariqa* membership, they have attracted the attention of youths and provided them with guidance in their search for themselves and God. Amongst youths, there is a tendency to return to historical definitions and understandings, holding—as did the east Persian Sufi al-Bushanji—that Sufism is meaning without reality, known even before it was named.[43] Millennials interested in Sufism have expressed similar views, noting the wealth and expansiveness of the religious experience. In an interview conducted on January 21, 2020, Moh. Arif Arifin and Faza Bina al-Alim indicated that they had become interested in Sufism because of the frequent poetry discussions it involved. *Salawat* and similar forms of worship have been integral parts of urban Sufism.

Sufism has found fertile ground in urban society, using cafés and other entertainment venues to reach the youths who commonly congregate therein. In this context, it is worth referring to Howell's argument that "cosmopolitan Muslims appreciate them for their relatively non-hierarchical and casual commercial setting" [44] while

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[43] William C. Chittick, *Sufism A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008).

[44] Howell and Bruinessen, "Sufism 'Modern' Islam."

keeping in mind that youths have their own particular culture and approach. This is a fundamental part of urban Sufism, playing a fundamental role in the movement's rapid development. Youths enjoy Sufi activities in cafés, viewing them as quite different from their everyday recreational activities (interview with Herlina, Yogyakarta, February 24, 2022).

Hijrah and Religious Formalism

Indonesian youths, both Millennials and Generation Z, have become increasingly involved in the *hijrah* movement promoted by Salafi Muslims.[45] This movement has a long history, tracing its roots to Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood and their efforts to infiltrate mainstream Muslim organizations in the 1980s.[46] Such organizations are well-organized, and became increasingly political, and this ultimately led to the establishment of the Social Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS) in 2002. Islamists held that, by creating their own political party, they would be better equipped to comprehensively and massively spread their religious messages.[47]

Islamist ideologies are conveyed in increasingly diverse approaches, especially popular social media directly consumed by youths. For that reason, Martin van Bruinessen (2013) is correct in saying that Islam in Indonesia has experienced what he terms a "conservative turn". There has been a rapid rise of Islamist discourses in academic and popular contexts, and youths have thus been unable to avoid its influence. They have maneuvered through these religious and socio-political contexts using various approaches; this has included the act of *hijrah,* which has been widespread amongst Indonesian youths of various backgrounds.

The surge in *da'wah* activities promoting *hijrah*, particularly on social media, has had a massive effect on Indonesian youths—

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[45] Yuyun Sunesti, Noorhaidi Hasan, and Muhammad Najib Azca, "Young Salafi-Niqabi and Hijrah: Agency and Identity Negotiation," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 8, 2 (2018): pp. 173–98, https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v8i2.173-197.

[46] Salman, "The Tarbiyah Movement: Why People Join This Indonesian Contemporary Islamic Movement," *Studia Islamika* 13, 2 (2006), https://doi.org/-10.15408/sdi.v13i2.566.

[47] Masdar Hilmy, "Partai Keadilan Sejahtera: A Mawdudian-Meliorist Vision of Islamism in Post-New Order Indonesia," *Studia Islamika* 14, 1 (2007), https://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v14i1.555.

including on their religiosity and spirituality. Many see participation in Sufi worship activities as part of the "road to *hijrah*". It is in this context that Ali Fakih described the process he goes through with such *da'wah* activities as path to Sufism. He felt that he had reached a low point in his life, and only by studying *tasawwuf* did he achieve enlightenment. Is this what many have called *hijrah*?" (Interview with Mohammad Ali Fakih, Yogyakarta, January 21, 2020).

The Salafi organizations that have driven the *hijrah* movement have generally promoted formal and formalistic religious practices. On the contrary, the youths who participate in Sufi activities in cafés and other urban areas are interested more in the friendly and loving Islam that welcomes all and adapts to new situations. Nia, for instance, emphasized that Islam brought her love, happiness, and tranquility. She argued that, when one adheres too closely to a strict and formalistic understanding of Islam, one tends to limit oneself to outer appearances. Nia noted that people often think that they have undergone *hijrah* when they are veiled (for women) and grow beard or wear particular pants (for men), while they lack basic religious knowledge. "I have met a lot of people like that. They say they've undergone *hijrah*, but quickly remove their veils when they're overheating. They use it to improve their appearance. They care only about outer appearances, rather than the contents of their hearts. The Sufis are different. They understand and teach Islam as love, and they allow this understanding to enter their hearts. When people learn *tasawwuf,* they take it into their hearts and try to implement it properly" (Interview with Nia, Yogyakarta, February 24, 2022).

The term *hijrah* is not commonly used in Sufism, as this understanding of Islam does not recognize the search for God as having a final destination. Sufism is understood as a guiding light, a means of helping individuals search for meaning. Although Sufi scholars do use the term *intiha'* to designate the end-point, the final destination, of the Sufi route of ascent (*mi'raj*), Sufism itself is always oriented toward the unending quest for self-realization.[48] This differs significantly from the Salafi understanding of *hijrah*, as seen (for example) in the posts tagged #pemudahijrah on Instagram and other

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[48] Arin Shawkat Salamah-Qudsi, "The Everlasting Sufi: Achieving the Final Destination of the Path (Intih) in the Sufi Teachings of Umar Al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234)," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 22, 3 (2011): pp. 313–38, https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etr075.

social media.[49] As such, youths interested in Sufism tend not to use the term *hijrah* to refer to the final destination in a religious journey:

> Actually, in *tasawwuf*, we have what is known as *jalan suluk*, the unending road, but those who claim *hijrah* themselves tend to claim to have achieved religious knowledge and belittle those who haven't undertaken *hijrah*." (Interview with Muhammad Aswar, Yogyakarta, January 21, 2020).

Such a view was also expressed by Faza Bina Al-Alim, who stated in January 21, 2020. He particularly touches on the notion of *jalan suluk*, which in his view does not mean to seek a final endpoint. The highest level possible, as argued by Ibn Arabi, is *maqâm lâ maqâm* (a level of no levels). The greater one reaches spiritual elightentment , the lesser he/she would claim religious authority. This concept has been explored by scholars such as William C. Chittick, who describes Ibn Arabi as using "Muhammadan stations" to mythify the process in terms of the well-known Islamic teaching that Muhammad knew everything that had been revealed to all the prophets who had come before him. He also calls it "the station of no station" (*maqâm lâ maqâm*), which means that perfection is achieved only by those who know self in terms of nothingness.[50] Ultimately, Sufism is a process through which Muslims learn the best way to know and approach their God.[51] Sufism can be learned and taught simultaneously, according to one's spiritual capacity.

Reaching Beyond Formality

Sufism is a dynamic expression of Islam, one that encompasses matters of theology, philosophy, literature, society, and culture.[52] At the same time, however, certain elements of Sufism do not correspond to the paradigms offered by *fiqh* scholars or, more broadly, those who desire the formal implementation of *sharia* law. One of the most

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[49] Taufiqur Rahman et al., "Hijrah and the Articulation of Islamic Identity of Indonesian Millenials on Instagram," *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication* 37, 2 (2021): pp. 154–70, https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2021-3702-10.

[50] William C. Chittick, "The Disclosure of the Intervening Image: Ibn 'Arabi on Death," *Discourse* 24, 1 (2002): pp. 51–62, https://doi.org/10.1353/dis.2003.0006.

[51] Chittick, *Sufism A Beginner's Guide*.

[52] Jamal J . Elias, "Sufism," *International Society of Iranian Studies* 31, 3 (1998): pp. 595–613.

controversial elements of Sufism is the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of form), popularized by Ibnu Arabi in his *Fushushul Hikam*. In the view of Muhammad U. Faruque (2016) however, there has never been a problem between Sufism and *fiqh*. He writes "this problem arises out of the concern that Sufism's *waḥdat al-wujūd* is somehow incommensurable with the teachings of *sharia*. This is not true, since there has never been such problem in the first place."

Islamic jurisprudence, or *fiqh*, offers strict limits for religious practices and expressions. *Fiqh* is often identical to the igid interpretations of Islam, which provide the basis for formalistic views of *sharia* law. Consequently, it may not simply be ignored, but recognized as providing clear guidance about what is permissible and what is forbidden. Even then, however, *fiqh* must not be understood as monolithic; drawing on the exegeses of their founders, several schools of Islam have promoted particular interpretations of Islamic law. Such factors underpin the historical resistance faced by Sufism and its practitioners, as seen in the case of Mansur Al-Hallaj.[53]

Paul L. Heck provided comprehensive insight into the two main components shaping Islamic jurisprudence, i.e., *dhahir* and *bathin*. *Dhahir* consists of specific commandments and prohibitions provided by *sharia* law, including not only those included in the primary sources of Islam (i.e. the Qur'an and the Sunnah, being God's Word and the guidance of the prophet, respectively) but also the conventions established by legal scholars. The *bathin*, meanwhile, refers to the mental and spiritual processes through which individuals bring themselves closer to the essential reality (*haqiqa*), something that exists beyond the physical, involving law while simultaneously reaching beyond it. Referring to these categories, the former focuses more on the formal and communal aspects of religion, as articulated by legal scholars (*faqih* and *ulama*), while the latter focuses on the psycho-spiritual teachings of religious and spiritual leaders (*syekh*). While *dhahir* seeks to worship God while simultaneously providing Muslims with particular norms, rules, and guidelines for communal living, *bathin* aims to facilitate the realization of God while offering unlimited potential for moral exploration. Those who achieve such knowledge are viewed as holy people who, through their proximity with God, serve as His

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[53] Simon Sorgenfrei, "Hidden or Forbidden, Elected or Rejected: Sufism as 'Islamic Esotericism'?," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 29, 2 (2018): pp. 145–65, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2018.1437945.

representatives (i.e., as *awliya' Allah*). In so doing, these people act as agents who provide others with access to divinity as well as a means of uncovering the meaning of the universe.[54]

At the same time, it must be recognized that opposition to formalistic understandings of *sharia* has been as dynamic as opposition to any other Islamic discourse. The Syrian Salafi thinker Jamal al-Dïn al-Qâsimï, for instance supported the idea of *wahdat al-wujüd* (unity of being) attributed to Ibn Arabï, which led him to stand up against Ibn Taymiyya when the latter accused Ibn Arabi of being a heretic. In this context, al-Qâsimï offered the concepts of *hulül* (incarnation) and *ittihâd* (union) to affirm and support Arabï's concept of *wahdat al-wujüd*.[55] Al-Qâsimï offers a fascinating example, being a prominent Salafi who nevertheless appreciated Sufism and provided Sufi scholars with the necessary space to explore the religious experience. Heck (2006) argues that legal and spiritual knowledge are complementary, and that expertise may be possessed by one person.[56] For urban Sufis, individuals such as al-Qâsimï support this argument, being individuals who were able to strike a balance between the formal and spiritual elements of religion (interview with Faza Bina al-Alim and Mohammad Aswar, Yogyakarta, January 21, 2020).

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that Salafists and Wahhabis have staunchly opposed the rituals and practices of Sufism, which they argue to be deviant (*bid'ah*). They trace their thought to Abdul Wahhab, a theologian who campaigned to uphold *tauhid*, purify religion by eradicating traditional practices, and use *sharia* as the formal and legal basis for both Muslim nations and societies. Indeed, *sharia* and *fiqh* are particularly positivistic when introduced to the state through the bureaucratization of *sharia*. This can be seen, for example, in Indonesia; as argued by Asep Saepudin Jahar (2019), "the institutionalization of Islamic law (sharia) in Indonesia is not exclusively defined by the emergence of shariatization in itself, but rather by the need for regulated administrative processes in religious practices that involve public matters". Employing a Weberian approach, Jahar succinctly uses the concepts of bureaucracy—

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[54] Paul L. Heck, "Mysticism as Morality: The Case of Sufism," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 34, 2 (2006): pp. 253–86.

[55] Mun'im Sirry, "Jamāl Al-Dīn Al-Qāsimī and the Salafi Approach to Sufism," *Welt Des Islams*, 2011, https://doi.org/10.1163/157006011X556102.

[56] Heck, "Mysticism as Morality: The Case of Sufism."

including the aforementioned bureaucratization of *sharia*—to describe diverse ideas such as written rules, formalization, following jurisdictional arenas, and the hierarchical system.[57]

Sufis, on the other hand, tend to employ a more open approach to *sharia*, one that prioritizes deep spiritual experiences and practices that may potentially reach beyond the rigid boundaries proscribed by *fiqh*. As argued by J. Spencer Trimingham in *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (cited in Umam, 2006), Sufism refers to "tendencies in Islam which aim at direct communion between God and man." Trimingham further argues that, because Sufism is a sphere of spiritual experience, it is always in contrast to and enmity with "Islamic consciousness deriving from prophetic revelation and comprehended within the Shari'ah and theology".[58]

Sufis have their own way of balancing formal *sharia* with spiritual practices, one that highlights the spiritual elements of formal requirements. They conduct *salah* and other worship not merely because it is obligatory, but because there is a particular spiritual desire to surrender themselves humbly to God and potentially receive His blessing. They recognize themselves not as lords, but as servants:

> There's a saying, *sharia* law is like a traffic light, which everyone on the road must obey. Most people simply obey, quietly, without considering the risks and benefits involved. Sufis, those who live a spiritual life, see this traffic light not only as telling them when to start and stop but as embodying other values, including service to the one who made the rules: God." (Interview with Muhammad Aswar, Yogyakarta, January 21, 2020).

Sufism thus softens the strict and often merciless products of *sharia* by searching for the essential and even existential elements underpinning them. They hold that life is not simply black-and-white; there must be more than just right and wrong. They thus understand love and kindness as reaching beyond the strict requirements of formalism.

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[57] Asep Saepudin Jahar, "Bureaucratizing Sharia in Modern Indonesia: The Case of Zakat, Waqf and Family Law," *Studia Islamika* 26, 2 (2019), https://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v26i2.7797.

[58] Saiful Umam, "The Guardian of the Integral Vision of Islamic Practice: The Naqshbandi Sufi Order in Indonesia," *Studia Islamika* 13, 2 (2006): pp. 263–91, https://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v13i2.568.

Formalism In and Out

Two important critiques of religious formalism have emerged amongst young Sufis in Yogyakarta. *First*, they recognize efforts to formalize *sharia* by incorporating it into positive law as coming from transnational efforts to "Islamize" Indonesia.[59] These efforts are backed by legal formalists, who view Islam as more than rituals and worship. For these transnational movements, Islam is not a source for an ideology but an ideology in and of itself. In advancing this ideology, such groups have established political parties through which they have struggled for the recognition of Islamic law and tried to safeguard the implementation of *sharia* as the all-embracing way of life through the organs of the state[60] by ensuring that they remain involved in the regulatory process at the local, regional, and national level. In *Islam and Politics*, Peter Mandaville describes them as using a bottom-up approach, using political parties and movements within society to challenge and compete with the authority of national-secular states and deal with varying governmental responses to the attempts by Islamists to enter the political field.

As Indonesia is a secular state, *sharia* cannot provide the entire basis for formal Indonesian law. At the same time, however, it is important for Indonesians, as it provides guidance in understanding and implementing the law. Likewise, many products of positive law in the country have adopted Islamic jurisprudence.[61] especially in areas that have received special autonomy status (such as Aceh). Other efforts have been made to formalize Islamic law in Indonesia by explicitly transforming the unitary republic into a caliphate, as promoted by Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia.[62]

Such machinations have received serious attention from young Sufis, who highlight the importance of substance over formal appearances. They seek a middle road, one that does not go to the extremes of using formalistic approaches to sharia to transform the nation's positive law. They recognize Indonesia as being founded on

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[59] Peter Mandaville, *Islam and Politics*, *Islam and Politics* (2014), https://doi.org/-10.4324/9781315814773.

[60] Yon Machmudi, *Islamising Indonesian: The Rise of Jemaah Tarbiyah and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS)* (2008), https://doi.org/10.26530/oapen_459299.

[61] Alfitri, "Expanding A Formal Role for Islamic Law in the Indonesian Legal System: The Case of Mu'amalat," *Journal of Law and Religion* 23, 1 (2007): pp. 249–70.

[62] Machmudi, *Islam. Indones. Rise Jemaah Tarb. Prosperous Justice Party*.

the ideology of Pancasila, and thus as having been established by consensus as a place where all religious expressions are protected and accommodated by the state.

> I don't agree with religious formalism, at least in an Indonesian context. We live in a plural country. Just like in Medina, the Prophet did not recommend Islam as the basis of the state, as Medina consisted of Muslims, Christians, and Jews. *Tasawwuf* strongly upholds the values of humanity. One Hadith holds, *Irhamu man fil ardi yarhamukum man fis sama'* (if you care for those on earth, then the skies will care for you). Sufis rarely pray for themselves; it is almost always for mankind in general (Interview with Faza Bina al-Alim, Yogyakarta, January 21, 2020).

Salafism is likewise opposed to Sufism, as it perceives Sufi practices and rituals as deviating from their particular textual and scriptural understanding of proscriptions of the Qur'an and the examples provided by the Prophet. Salafists desire a "pure" religion, one free of traditional and cultural elements.[63] As such, they decry Sufi rituals and practices such as congregational *zikir,* commemorating Maulid Nabi, *khalwat* (seclusion), *rabita* (becoming bound with a master/*sheikh*), and honoring one's teachers and traditions, as these emerged long after the death of the Prophet.[64]

Sufis view the religious formalism espoused by transnational Islamist movements such as Ikhwanul Muslimin and Wahhabism as an outside threat, one that significantly contrasts with their desire to achieve balance and promote acceptance. For them, it is more important to better oneself, as self-enlightenment is an essential part of Sufism. As such, they seek to protect their families from formalistic worldviews, maintaining their resolve to stay their course even in the face of outside pressure (Interview with Moh. Arif Arifin, Yogyakarta, January 21, 2020). Sufism provides them with a means of seeking God through spiritual means, one that need not rely on outside agents and agencies.

> Sufism is the middle road, the path of the heart, whereby we guide ourselves. Those who reject Sufism, like Wahhabis, do so because that is indeed their ideological position. The religious formalism they promote can still be staved off with discourse and

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[63] Howell and Bruinessen, "Sufism 'Modern' Islam."

[64] Ibid; Itzchak Weismann, *The Naqshbandiyya* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

> *tasawwuf* activities that are open to all; both can be effective counter-narratives." (Interview with Faza Bina al-Alim, Yogyakarta, January 21, 2020).

At the same time, young Sufis also recognize discourses and activities that promote formalism as part of the dynamic development and expression of Islam. This was emphasized, for example, by Muhammad Aswar, who argued that Muslims have been divided in their legal and political thought for centuries. Muslims were united, he argued, only in the years immediately following the passing of the Prophet, with Caliph Umar bin Khattab being the last to lead a united *ummah*. Since then, the utopian ideal of a singular Islamic nation has never been realized (Interview with Muhammad Aswar, Yogyakarta, January 21, 2020).

Second, formality from within, an exclusivist tendencies of Sufis who congregate solely with members of the same *tariqa*—i.e., with followers of the same spiritual leaders. In Britain, for example, Werbner (2006) highlighted how diverse tariqa/Sufi orders exist. Although Sufis claim to belong to named *tariqa*, each of which follows the teaching of a particular thinker, none of these orders have inclusive command structures.[65] When such *tariqa* exist, it is entirely possible for Sufis to exclude each other. Such brotherhoodism has been perceived as one of Islam's greatest internal threats. As written by Éric Geoffroy, "we frequently hear that 'Islamicism' is the enemy of Islam. Similarly, brotherhoodism undoubtedly represents the greatest danger to Sufism. The best-informed critics of brotherhoodism are not in fact Wahhabites or Salafis but Sufi masters themselves".[66]

Such brotherhoodism inexorably leads to a new form of formalism, wherein Sufi *tariqa* create their own particular boundaries and exclusive spaces. Young Sufis in Yogyakarta have recognized this tendency as a serious threat to Sufism and the world of *tasawwuf*. Indeed, due to the openness and accommodativeness of their own approach, young Sufis have been ready to criticize the formalism that sometimes emerges within the Sufi community.

> Exclusivism amongst Sufis cannot be readily avoided, what with the creation of boundaries between *tariqa*. Especially with the

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[65] Werbner, "Seekers on the Path: Different Ways of Being a Sufi in Britain."

[66] Éric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine: The Inner Path of Islam* (Indiana: World Wisdom, 2010).

stronger and more authoritative ones; right now, the world of *tasawwuf* is being eaten from within." (Interview with Khairiyanto, Yogyakarta, January 23, 2020).

Conclusion

Urban Sufism has provided a massive and dynamic means for urban youths to explore their spirituality. Having not affiliated with any *tariqa*, urban Sufism has provided an open and accommodative approach for urban youths to seek spiritual enlightenment. It has brought *tasawwuf* closer to the everyday lives of urban residents who are seeking to negotiate their identities as Muslims in the face of the religious formalism promoted by transnational Salafi and Wahhabi movements.

At the same time, young Sufis see that the threat of formalism does not only come from these transnational movements, but also from within Sufism itself. They recognize that Sufism and Salafism have challenged each other throughout the history of Islam. At the same time, they acknowledge that many Sufis prefer to congregate with their fellow Sufis. As such, they have offered a new, open, approach, one that "reaches beyond formalism" to advance spirituality as the basis for all religious activity. In this manner, urban Sufism has provided an inclusive space for people with diverse understandings of Islam and religious expressions.

These findings have significant implications, first, for the reinforcement of urban Sufism as an alternative space wherein Sufi activities can be conducted without adhering to any particular order, and second, for the brotherhoodism that has cultivated a sense of exclusivism within the diverse Sufi *tariqa*. []

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