

The Dynamics of Sufism Based on Plural Indonesian Society: A Study of the Socio-Academic Role of KH. Nur Salim in Malang, East Java

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Abstract

In the late twentieth century, he witnessed a significant shift in Islamic discourse in Indonesia, particularly with the rise of egalitarianism and the indigenization of Islam. Against this backdrop, this study investigates KH. Nur Salim's pivotal role in adapting Sufism to a pluralistic society in Malang, East Java. It aims to explore how his down-to-earth approach effectively integrated spiritual values with social life, fostering a form of Sufism that suits the needs of modern society. Using qualitative phenomenological methods, the research captured the lived experiences and perceptions of the community regarding KH Nur Salim in his socio-academic role. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to understand the phenomenon comprehensively. The findings show that KH. Nur Salim, centered on four pillars- patience, humility, acceptance, and generosity- not only advances individual spirituality but also strengthens social cohesion in a diverse society. This approach is in line with theories that emphasize contextual adaptation of religious teachings, contributing to the discourse on the role of religion in promoting pluralism and tolerance. However, the study acknowledges limitations related to geographical coverage and methodological challenges, which may impact the generalizability of the findings. These insights have implications for the broader application of Sufism in pluralistic contexts globally.

Keywords: Sufism; Plural Society; Compound Society

introduction

Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, has a long and rich history in the development of Sufism.¹ Sufism, or tasawwuf, plays a vital role in the spiritual life of Indonesian Muslim society. However, what makes it unique in Indonesia is its ability to thrive and adapt in a highly plural society where different religions, cultures, and traditions coexist.² In this context, Sufism functions as an individual spiritual path and a social force that promotes social harmony and cohesion amidst existing diversity.³

In a plural society like Indonesia, Sufism has transformed into an inclusive form of spirituality that can interact and integrate with various elements of society.⁴ One of the central figures in developing Sufism based on plural society is KH Nur Salim, a cleric from Malang, East Java. He is known for the depth of his spirituality and his role in strengthening social and academic relations in his community. Through education and social interaction, KH Nur Salim implemented the values of Sufism in the daily life of a plural society, thus creating a space where diversity can be managed well.

This research will examine how Sufism, taught by KH Nur Salim, significantly contributed to maintaining social balance in Malang, which is known for its religious and cultural diversity. Focusing on the socio-academic role, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of Sufism in the context of Indonesia's plural society, which is still rarely discussed in academic literature.

Sufism has received particular attention from academics and researchers; this can be seen in several publications that examine it, especially in Indonesia, including these studies. Dudung Abdurahman's research examines the possibility of changing the tarekat movement into several types of movements that lead to socio-politics.⁵ Amir Maliki Abitolkha's research examines the shift of tariqah towards the ideological values of

¹ Syamsun Ni'am, "Tasawuf Di Tengah Perubahan Sosial (Studi Tentang Peran Tarekat Dalam Dinamika Sosial-Politik Di Indonesia)," *Harmoni* 15, no. 2 (2016): 123–137.

² Hamidulloh Ibda, "Penguatan Nilai-Nilai Sufisme Dalam Nyadran Sebagai Khazanah Islam Nusantara," *Jurnal islam nusantara* 2, no. 2 (2018): 148–161.

³ Aflah Misbah, "Potret Lanskap Harmoni Dalam Proses Propagasi Sufisme Di Warung Kopi Yogyakarta," *Harmoni* 17, no. 1 (2018): 88–104.

⁴ Wasisto Raharjo Jati, "Sufisme Urban Di Perkotaan: Konstruksi Keimanan Baru Kelas Menengah Muslim," *Jurnal Kajian & Pengembangan Manajemen Dakwah* 5 (2015).

⁵ Dudung Abdurahman, "Sufisme Di Priangan: Doktrin, Ritual, Dan Sosial-Politik," *TAJIDID*, 2016.

Sufism.⁶ Nur Kafid conducted research that examines the role of Sufism in the social sphere. This research uses a literature approach, and the critical finding is that several Sufism figures are involved in social politics. Muhamad Basyrul Muvid's research reveals that the Sufistic dimension of education can be an alternative to building harmony, taught from an early age.⁷ Aminah Azis's research on socio-sufism activities can create social righteousness, which has implications for social life.⁸ Meanwhile, Wahyu Nugroho's research examines the involvement of the Naqsyabandi order in interfaith dialog activities. Even the Naqshbandi sheiks continue to praise religious plurality as one of God's blessings.⁹

Although Sufism has become the object of considerable study in the Indonesian context, especially in its spiritual and ceremonial aspects, there is still a significant gap in the literature that discusses the socio-academic role of Sufism, especially in plural societies. Most previous studies tend to focus on theological and philosophical analysis but pay less attention to how the teachings of Sufism can be applied to face social challenges in the context of religious and cultural diversity. For example, in Malang, an area with high spiritual and cultural plurality, few studies have highlighted how Sufism functions as a social force that can create harmony in this complex society.

Specifically, this research explores KH. Nur Salim's role in applying Sufism to strengthen social cohesion and address potential conflicts in Malang, East Java. In addition, it identifies KH. Nur Salim's strategies in managing diversity and creating social harmony, as well as examining Sufism as a tool for interfaith dialog and the formation of inclusive social spaces. As a scholar and academic, KH. Nur Salim successfully integrated the values of Sufism into diverse social life. The results of this research are expected to broaden the understanding of the role of Sufism in the context of a plural society in Indonesia.

Thus, the results of this research are expected to provide new insights into the dynamics of Sufism in plural societies while offering practical guidance for developing

⁶ Amir Maliki Abitolkha, "Eklektisisme Tasawuf: Metamorfosis Sufisme Dan Relevansinya Dengan Tarekat Modern," *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam* 6, no. 2 (2016): 435–459.

⁷ Muhamad Basyrul Muvid, "Pendidikan Damai Berdimensi Sufistik: Alternatif Merajut Kebhinekaan Masyarakat Indonesia," *Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Islam* 10, no. 1 (2022): 27.

⁸ Aminah Azis et al., "Socio-Sufism Practices within the Indonesia's Tariqah Practitioners," *International Journal of Religion* 5, no. 1 (2024): 170–178.

⁹ Wahyu Nugroho, "Sufism and Interreligious Dialogue: The Naqshbandi Haqqani Sufi Order in Indonesia," *Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism* 10, no. 1 (2021): 111–126.

relevant Sufism in other regions with similar challenges. In addition, this research is expected to be an essential reference for future studies that explore the interaction between Sufism and social diversity in Indonesia. As such, this research will not only enrich the existing literature but also open new insights into the potential of Sufism as a tool to address social challenges in a diverse society.

By highlighting the socio-academic dimension that is less discussed in the literature. This research uses a holistic approach to understand the role of Sufism in a plural society, especially in Malang, East Java. In KH. Nur Salim thought Sufism was a spiritual practice and a social force that encouraged interfaith dialogue and strengthened social cohesion in a multicultural and multireligious society.

This research is highly relevant to Indonesia, which is increasingly plural and facing complex social challenges. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the practical application of Sufism in addressing contemporary social issues, particularly in creating an inclusive and harmonious environment. The findings of this study are expected to be a reference for academics, practitioners, and policymakers interested in the role of religion in promoting peace and social stability in multicultural societies.

Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological type to deeply understand the experiences and perceptions of the community towards the socio-academic role of KH. Nur Salim in the context of Sufism in the plural society of Malang.¹⁰ This approach was chosen because it can explore the meaning of complex social and cultural phenomena, allowing a deeper understanding of KH—Nur Salim's contribution to maintaining social harmony through the teachings of Sufism.

The data collection techniques include in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation studies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with KH Nur Salim's students, members of the Sufism community, and religious and cultural leaders in Malang to obtain their views and experiences. Participatory observation was conducted by attending religious and social activities related to Sufism to understand the dynamics of social interaction firsthand. Documentation studies involved analyzing relevant historical documents, manuscripts, articles, and local archives to complement

¹⁰ Muhammad Farid, *Fenomenologi : Dalam Penelitian Ilmu Sosial* (Jakarta: Prenadamedia Group, 2018).

primary data. The data obtained was analyzed descriptively through coding to identify key themes from the interviews and observations. This analysis aimed to understand the patterns of meaning and the community's interpretation of KH—Nur Salim's role in a plural society.¹¹

Data validity was maintained through source triangulation by comparing information from various data collection techniques. Member checking ensured the researcher's interpretation matched the informants' understanding. In addition, a detailed audit trail was documented to maintain transparency of the research process. In contrast, the credibility and transferability of the results were maintained through deep engagement in the field and rich contextual descriptions.

Overview of KH. Nur Salim

This research found three different versions of KH. Nur Salim's birth year was 1941, according to his Hajj passport, 1939 based on his ID card, and 1934, from his narrative. The inaccuracy of birth registration, especially in rural areas at that time, meant many important figures like KH. Nur Salim was not well documented.¹²

KH. Nur Salim is a product of traditional pesantren education, where his formal education only reached the second grade of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Diniyah. Subsequently, he continued his education at the KH. Abdul Mukti pesantren in Blitar and devoted himself to several prominent scholars in East Java. Ketawadukan, an attitude of humility and respect, became a deep characteristic in KH—Nur Salim's spiritual journey, greatly influencing his preaching approach.

Coming from Sukolilo village in Jabung, a rural area with a highly solidary society, KH Nur Salim developed a Sufistic attitude that later became the foundation of his da'wah. The dhikr and manaqib movements he led attracted the community's attention without the need for formal recruitment, demonstrating his strong spiritual influence.

KH. Nur Salim's presence in Jabung brought significant transformation by encouraging the integration of religious teachings into local culture and creating solid social ties. KH Nur Salim's understanding of complex agrarian society enriched his social

¹¹ Abrar Dawud, *Buku Fenomenologi Maraimbang-PDF*, 2019.

¹² Dokumen keluarga KH. Nur Salim

maturity and flexibility in conveying religious messages. His pesantren education also shaped his mindset and actions consistent with spiritual principles.¹³

KH. Nur Salim highly valued the tradition of tabarrukan, devotion to a respected scholar, and his stories of pilgrimage, such as when visiting KH. As'ad Syamsul Arifin emphasizes his spiritual depth and respect for religious tradition. Throughout his life, although he left no written works, KH. Nur Salim left a legacy of social work that continues to live on in the community. His social service became amal jariyah (*charity*), which brought broad benefits and left a lasting mark on the community's social life.

KH. Nur Salim's Conception of Sufism in the Context of Sufism in the Archipelago

The conception of Sufism taught by KH Nur Salim shows a form of Sufism that is unique and relevant in Indonesia's plural society, especially in Malang, East Java. KH Nur Salim succeeded in integrating the teachings of Sufism with down-to-earth social practices. This approach aligns with the Sufism tradition developed in the archipelago since the 12th century.¹⁴

This research corroborates the opinion that Sufism in Indonesia is an individual spiritual path and a tool to strengthen social and cultural ties in a diverse society.¹⁵ For example, KH Nur Salim's "Tasawuf Membumi" concept illustrates how he combines the divine dimension with the practice of everyday life, an approach similar to Martin van Bruinessen's theory of "Social Sufism" in Southeast Asia.¹⁶

As with Ibn 'Arabi's Falsafi Sufism and al-Ghazali's Sunni Sufism, Nur Salim adapted and simplified Sufism's teachings to be accessible to the general public. His teachings that prioritize four simple pillars, patience, galah, Nariman, and loman, show a severe effort to contextualize Sufism to be relevant to the lives of Javanese people. This is in line with Fazlur Rahman's view, which emphasizes the importance of adjusting Islamic teachings to the local context so that they can be accepted and applied effectively by the community.¹⁷ As such, this research not only enriches the understanding of Sufism

¹³ Wawancara dengan tokoh agama Desa Sukolilo di Jabung

¹⁴ Sokhi Huda, "Karakter Historis Sufisme Pada Masa Klasik, Modern, Dan Kontemporer," *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam* 7, no. 1 (2017): 64–95.

¹⁵ M Khamim, "Sufisme Dan Perubahan Sosial: Kaum Tarekat Dan Dinamika Sosial Keagamaan" (2021).

¹⁶ Martin Van Bruinessen, "The Origins and Development of Sufi Orders (Tarekat) in Southeast Asia" (1994).

¹⁷ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, vol. 15 (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

in Indonesia but also offers a theoretical contribution to understanding how Sufism can function as a bridge between spiritual values and social needs in a plural society.

KH. Nur Salim's Contribution to Sufism Theory and Its Application in the Field

The results of this study make a significant contribution to the theory of Sufism, especially in understanding the social role of Sufism in a plural society. KH Nur Salim, with his Sufism teaching that prioritizes the simplification of spiritual concepts, introduces a Sufism model oriented towards individual self-development and social empowerment. His approach is in line with the idea of “functional Sufism” proposed by Clifford Geertz, where Sufism is not only seen as an esoteric practice but also as an effective social tool to overcome the challenges of everyday life.¹⁸ By emphasizing aspects of Sufism, khaki, and charity, KH. Nur Salim succeeded in bridging spiritual teachings with society's practical needs, strengthening his community's social and moral networks.

On the ground, the influence of KH. Nur Salim's teachings are reflected in the emergence of various Sufism-based associations in Malang after his passing, such as Riyadhul Jannah and Arraudhoh, which adopted his approach to dhikr and religious rituals. This phenomenon shows that the Sufism taught by KH Nur Salim has theoretical relevance and is applicable in daily life, especially in building social solidarity and promoting harmony in a plural society. This also supports research conducted by Azyumardi Azra on the role of Sufism in the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia, where the Sufism approach that combines local values with Islamic teachings has proven effective in maintaining and strengthening Islamic identity in a diverse society.¹⁹ Therefore, this study deepens our understanding of Sufism theory and offers practical insights that can be applied in the socio-religious context of Indonesia and the wider Southeast Asian region.

While this study provides important insights into KH, Nur Salim's socio-academic role in the dynamics of Sufism in Indonesia's plural society has some limitations that must be acknowledged. *First*, this study is limited by the specific geographical context of Malang, East Java, which may not fully represent the dynamics of Sufism in other parts

¹⁸ Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, vol. 37 (University of Chicago press, 1971).

¹⁹ Azyumardi Azra, *Perspektif Islam Di Asia Tenggara*, Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 1989.

of Indonesia. As Merle Ricklefs stated in his research on Islamization in Java, religious dynamics in one region are often influenced by unique local factors, so generalizations from one area to another must be made with caution.²⁰ Although rich in regional data, this study may not capture the variations of Sufism in other regions with different socio-cultural characteristics.

The *second* limitation relates to subjectivity in interpreting KH—Nur Salim's teachings. As a charismatic spiritual figure, his followers receive his teachings and practices with respect and awe, influencing how data is collected and interpreted. This phenomenon aligns with what Rizqa Ahmadi identified in his study on tarekat and charisma in Indonesia, where the relationship between student and teacher is often colored by deep reverence, making it difficult for researchers to adopt a truly objective perspective.²¹

Third, methodological limitations must also be acknowledged. Although this research used a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews and document analysis, challenges arose in combining historical data and contemporary interviews, which sometimes resulted in narratives that were not always consistent. As critical historiography suggests, differences in historical sources and oral testimonies can pose challenges in compiling a coherent and integrated picture of the research subject. As such, these limitations point to the need for caution in interpreting the results and invite readers to consider possible biases that may affect the findings.

Several directions can be taken for future research based on this study's results and the limitations identified. First, a more in-depth comparative study between KH Nur Salim's Sufism and other Sufism figures in Indonesia, such as Hamzah Fansuri in Sumatra or Sheikh Yusuf al-Makassari in Sulawesi, could provide greater insight into how Sufism developed in different cultural contexts. As stated by Antony John in his research on Sufism in Southeast Asia, each region has its peculiarities in adapting the teachings of Sufism by local social and cultural dynamics.²² Researchers can identify common patterns

²⁰ Merle Calvin Ricklefs, *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and Other Visions, c. 1830-1930* (nus Press, 2007).

²¹ Rizqa Ahmadi, "The Politics of a Local Sufism in Contemporary Indonesia," *Epistemé: Jurnal Pengembangan Ilmu Keislaman* 16, no. 01 (2021): 59–82.

²² Anthony H Johns, "Sufism in Southeast Asia: Reflections and Reconsiderations," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26, no. 1 (1995): 169–183.

and variations in Sufism practices acculturated into local traditions in different regions by conducting comparative studies.

Second, an interdisciplinary approach combining anthropology, sociology, and religious studies can enrich our understanding of the role of Sufism in plural societies. This research has shown how KH. Nur Salim's Sufism successfully brings together spiritual and social values. Still, a broader approach could explore how cultural, political, and economic aspects also influence the acceptance and adaptation of Sufism in various communities. As suggested by Noor Rachmat in a study on pluralism in Indonesia, understanding the interaction between religion and socio-cultural contexts requires cross-disciplinary analysis that can capture the complexity of social reality.²³ Thus, future research that adopts an interdisciplinary perspective will be better able to uncover the hidden dimensions of Sufism that shape religious and cultural identity in Indonesia.

These suggestions are expected to open new opportunities for more in-depth and comprehensive research on Sufism in Indonesia and enrich academic discussions on how Sufism can function as a social and spiritual force in an increasingly plural and complex society.

The Role of Sufism in Pluralism and the Challenges of the Digital Age

The findings of this study have social and ethical implications, especially in the context of diversity and the development of digital technology in Indonesia. KH. Nur Salim's tasawwuf teachings emphasize patience, *galah*, *Nariman*, and *Ioman*. Sufism is relevant in spiritual life and serves as an ethical principle that can strengthen social harmony in plural societies. In the context of religious pluralism in Indonesia, the teachings of Sufism that emphasize tolerance and simplicity can potentially reduce conflict and strengthen inter-religious harmony.²⁴ As stated by Abdurrahman Wahid in the idea of *Islam pribumisasi*, Islamic teachings acculturated with local values can be a solid basis for building an inclusive and peaceful society.²⁵ Thus, KH. Nur Salim's Sufism

²³ Noor Rachmat, "Sosio-Teologis: Memahami Dualitas Perspektif Pluralisme Agama Di Indonesia," *Harmoni* 11, no. 2 (2012): 43–52.

²⁴ Ilham Masykuri Hamdie, "Jejak-Jejak Pluralisme Agama Dalam Sufisme," *Khazanah: Jurnal Studi Islam Dan Humaniora* 17, no. 2 (2019): 263–282.

²⁵ Abdurrahman Wahid, "Pribumisasi Islam Dalam Islam Indonesia, Menatap Masa Depan," *Jakarta: P3M* (1989).

not only contributes to individual spiritual development but also to broader social development.

However, challenges arise in the context of the increasingly dominant use of digital technology in the dissemination of religious teachings. While digital technology offers opportunities to disseminate Sufi teachings to a broader audience, it also risks simplifying or distorting deep Sufistic values.²⁶ As Charles Hirschkind discussed in his study on the use of technology in Islamic da'wah, digital media can change how society understands and internalizes religious teachings.²⁷ In this case, it is essential for Sufistic communities and scholars, such as the followers of KH Nur Salim, to develop wise strategies for utilizing digital technology so that the spiritual messages conveyed remain intact and do not lose their moral and ethical essence.

Therefore, this study not only provides insight into the role of Sufism in strengthening pluralism but also underscores the need for a robust ethical policy in disseminating the teachings of Sufism in the digital age so that it can maintain its relevance and authenticity amidst rapid social change.

Conclusion

This research has revealed that KH. Nur Salim played an essential role in developing and adapting the teachings of Sufism in a plural society in Malang, East Java. Through a down-to-earth approach, KH Nur Salim integrated spiritual values with social life, creating a form of Sufism relevant to modern society's needs. His concept of Sufism, which focuses on simplifying spiritual teachings through four pillars - patience, *galah*, *Nariman*, and *Ioman* - has proven effective in strengthening social solidarity and promoting harmony in a diverse society.

Furthermore, this study shows that Sufism, in the form taught by KH Nur Salim, plays a role in individual spiritual development and in creating broader social cohesion. This Sufism approach aligns with theories that emphasize the importance of adapting religious teachings to local contexts and contributes to the literature that addresses the role of religion in strengthening pluralism and tolerance in society. However, the study

²⁶ Arif Rahmat Triasa, "Tarikat Naqshbandi Haqqaniyyah: Pendekatan Digital Dalam Penyebaran Ajaran Apokaliptik-Mesianik," in *Graduate Forum: International Conference Post-Graduate UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta*, vol. 1, 2023, 17–28.

²⁷ Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (Columbia University Press, 2006).

also acknowledges limitations, particularly in terms of geographical coverage and methodological challenges, which may affect the generalizability of the findings.

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