

Educational Transformation and Islamic Learning through Sufi Orders in the Indonesian Archipelago

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study examines the role of Sufi orders (*tarekat*) as agents of Islamic educational transformation in the Indonesian archipelago by analyzing their contributions to the spread of Islam, the development of educational institutions, teaching methods, and the formation of social ethics within Indonesian Muslim society. **Methods:** The study employs a qualitative historical method with a sociological-religious approach, following the stages of heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography, drawing on primary and secondary sources from leading scholars such as Martin van Bruinessen, Azyumardi Azra, and A.H. Johns. **Results:** The findings reveal that Sufi orders functioned far beyond their role as spiritual institutions, operating as systematic centers of informal education through oral instruction, the teacher-student relationship (*suhbah*), spiritual discipline (*suluk* and *riyadhah*), memorization, and collective learning in *dhikr* assemblies and religious study circles (*pengajian*). The *sanad* system ensured the authenticity of knowledge transmission, while the Sufi order tradition served as the foundation for the establishment of *pesantren* in Java and *surau* in West Sumatra. Furthermore, Sufi orders played a significant role in promoting Islamic literacy, facilitating cultural integration, shaping social ethics, and producing a class of influential local religious scholars (*ulama*). **Novelty:** The novelty of this study lies in its approach of explicitly positioning Sufi orders as the primary agents of educational transformation (rather than merely as a religious movement) within the historical context of Islamization in the Indonesian archipelago, while also demonstrating the pedagogical relevance of Sufi order traditions for the development of contemporary Islamic education in Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

Islamization in the Indonesian archipelago was a gradual historical process involving social, cultural, economic, and religious dimensions. Within this process, Sufism and the Sufi orders (*tarekat*) played a significant role not only as instruments of Islamic propagation but also as agents of educational and intellectual transformation. Through adaptive approaches that accommodated local traditions and cultural values, Sufi scholars were able to introduce Islamic teachings in ways that were more easily accepted by societies previously influenced by Hindu-Buddhist traditions and indigenous beliefs. Consequently, the study of Sufism and Sufi orders becomes an important aspect in understanding the development of Islamic education and learning in the Indonesian archipelago from the thirteenth century onward.

Unlike many regions where Islam spread through political or military expansion, Islam in the Indonesian archipelago developed primarily through trade networks, cultural interaction, educational activities, and the preaching of Muslim scholars and Sufis. In this context, Sufi figures played a strategic role in shaping religious learning and transmitting Islamic values within local communities. The spiritual teachings emphasized in Sufism, such as *zuhud* (asceticism), *mahabbah* (devotion), *tazkiyat al-nafs* (self-purification), and social tolerance, contributed to the formation of Islamic

educational traditions that integrated spirituality, morality, and communal harmony. Through religious gatherings, pesantren-like institutions, halaqah, and informal educational circles, Sufi networks became important channels for the dissemination of Islamic knowledge and practices (Azra, 2001).

The influence of Sufism in the Indonesian archipelago became increasingly prominent during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the emergence of influential Sufi scholars such as Hamzah Fansuri, Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani, Abdurrauf Singkel, and Yusuf al-Makassari. These figures not only produced intellectual and religious works but also established extensive educational and da'wah networks across different regions. During this period, various Sufi orders, including Qadiriyyah, Syattariyyah, Naqsyabandiyah, Sammaniyah, and Qadiriyyah wa Naqsyabandiyah, developed and contributed significantly to the transformation of Islamic learning and religious authority within society (Azra, 2001; Fathurrahman, 2013). The presence of these Sufi orders demonstrates that Islamic education in the Indonesian archipelago was not limited to formal religious instruction but also involved spiritual discipline, social ethics, and cultural adaptation that shaped the broader Islamic civilization of the region.

The Islamization process carried out through Sufi orders in Indonesia was not confined to the textual dimensions of religion alone; it also made education a foundational medium. Through Islamic learning and the use of education as a vehicle, Sufi orders successfully made substantial contributions to educational transformation in the Indonesian archipelago. This transformation is evident in the development of traditional Islamic educational institutions such as the *surau*, *dayah*, and *pesantren*, which functioned not only as centers of religious instruction but also as spaces for the moral, spiritual, and social formation of Muslim communities. In practice, Sufi orders employed the teacher-student relationship, example-based instruction, *dhikr*, *halaqah*, and spiritual discipline as effective educational methods for instilling Islamic values within local communities.

Furthermore, the Sufistic approach's adaptability to local culture made the process of Islamic learning more readily accepted by the peoples of the archipelago. Sufi orders did not merely teach the ritual aspects of religion; they also shaped the intellectual framework, ethics, and traditions of Islamic thought that subsequently influenced the development of Islamic education across various regions of Indonesia. Therefore, the existence of Sufi orders can be understood not merely as a spiritual-religious movement, but also as an agent of educational transformation that played a central role in the Islamization process of the Indonesian archipelago.

Several prior studies are relevant to this topic. First, Kamas Wahyu Amboro (2023) in "Integration of Sufism Values into the Curriculum of Islamic Religious Education Subject in Junior High School" discusses the historical development of Sufism and its contributions to the growth of Islamic education in Indonesia, particularly in the formation of spiritual and moral values within Islamic education (Abitolkha & Mas'ud, 2021). Second, the study "Transformation of Islamic Education in the Indonesian Archipelago from the 13th Century to the Modern Era (A Historical Study)" by Jihaduddin Akbar Auladi et al. (2025) examines the dynamics of Islamic education development in the archipelago from the early Islamization period to the modern era, with emphasis on institutional transformation, curriculum development, and the adaptation of Islamic education to local culture and modernization (Auladi et al., 2025). Third, Muhammad Syafa's (2016) thesis, "Transformation of Sufi Order Values in Formal

Educational Institutions (A Case Study at MA Ihsaniat, Pesantren Attahdzib Ngoro Jombang)," focuses on the implementation and transformation of Sufi order values in formal educational institutions, particularly in character formation and the spiritual development of students within a modern pesantren environment (Syafa, 2016).

Based on these three studies, it can be observed that prior research generally discusses Sufism and Sufi orders in the context of Islamic education development, institutional educational transformation, and the implementation of spiritual values in formal educational settings. However, these studies have not specifically examined the role of Sufi orders as primary agents in the process of Islamic learning and educational transformation during the historical period of Islamization in the Indonesian archipelago. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by highlighting how Sufi orders functioned not only as spiritual-religious movements, but also as a medium of Islamic learning and educational transformation for the peoples of the archipelago. This study also seeks to analyze the process of transmitting Islamic values, the development of traditional Islamic educational institutions, and the formation of the socio-religious life of Muslim communities in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method using historical research with a sociological-religious approach. The historical method was applied because this study focused on examining past events related to the role of Sufism and Sufi orders in the transformation of Islamic education and learning in the Indonesian archipelago. Historical research enables the researcher to analyze events systematically, critically, and objectively based on historical evidence and relevant scholarly sources (Gottschalk, 1969). The historical research process in this study consisted of several stages, namely topic selection, heuristics (source collection), source criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Kuntowijoyo, 2005). The heuristic stage involved collecting various historical sources such as manuscripts, books, journals, archival materials, and scholarly works related to Sufism, Islamic education, and the Islamization process in the Indonesian archipelago. Sources were selected based on three criteria: (1) relevance to the study's focus on Sufism, Sufi orders, and Islamic education in the Indonesian archipelago; (2) scholarly credibility, including publications by recognized historians and peer-reviewed academic works; and (3) chronological and thematic suitability to the historical period under discussion. Important references used in this study include the works of Martin van Bruinessen, Azyumardi Azra, A.H. Johns, and other scholars discussing Sufi networks and Islamic intellectual traditions in Southeast Asia.

After the sources were collected, the verification stage was conducted through external and internal criticism to evaluate the authenticity, credibility, and relevance of the data obtained (Wasino & Hartatik, 2018). External criticism focused on identifying the authorship, publication background, and authenticity of historical documents, while internal criticism examined the consistency of arguments, possible author bias, and the corroboration of information through comparison with other historical sources. Primary sources, such as the writings of Martin van Bruinessen, are verified by confirming the identity of the author and the validity of their work. Meanwhile, the arguments or narratives within a source can be critiqued through corroboration (cross-checking) with other relevant sources. The next stage was interpretation, which involved analyzing and synthesizing historical facts derived from the verified sources. The final stage was

historiography, namely reconstructing and presenting the interpreted historical facts into a coherent historical narrative concerning the contribution of Sufism and Sufi orders to educational and social transformation in Indonesian Muslim society (Sulasman, 2014).

To strengthen the analysis, this study integrated historical perspectives with sociological and religious approaches. The sociological-religious approach was used to examine how Sufi orders (*tarekat*) functioned not only as spiritual institutions but also as agents of social and educational transformation (Hamali, 2018). Through this approach, the study analyzed the influence of Sufi teachings, collective rituals, and educational networks on the development of Islamic learning traditions and social interaction within local communities. In addition, the religious dimension of this approach was used to understand how Sufi teachings were adapted to the cultural context of the Indonesian archipelago, thereby contributing significantly to the spread of Islam and the transformation of Islamic education. This approach is also relevant for analyzing communities experiencing changes in Islamic education and teaching through the presence of Sufi orders.

First participants, since this study is a historical qualitative study, it did not involve human participants. The units of analysis consisted of historical documents, manuscripts, scholarly books, journal articles, and archival materials relevant to Sufism, Sufi orders, and Islamic education in the Indonesian archipelago. Second instrument, the primary research instrument was the researcher, supported by source criticism sheets and document analysis to organize, evaluate, and interpret historical evidence. And third procedures, the research procedure followed the stages of historical research, including topic selection, heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, historiography, and sociological-religious analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Arrival of Sufism and Sufi Orders in the Indonesian Archipelago

Regarding the early history of Sufism, Fazlur Rahman, in his book *Islam*, emphasized that the seeds of Sufism had in fact been present since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, even though no formal term "Sufism" existed at that time. The life of Rasulullah SAW itself is the highest manifestation of the values of Sufism itself, including asceticism towards the world, sincerity in worship, patience in facing trials, submission to Allah in all circumstances, and also perseverance in worship that goes beyond basic obligations (Rahman, 1994). The spiritual values that later became the core of Sufism teachings, such as *zuhd* (asceticism), *ikhlas* (sincerity), *sabr* (patience), *tawakkal* (submission to Allah), and *qana'ah* (satisfaction with what is), all came from the teachings and example of the Prophet Muhammad. It is also noted that the lives of the Ahl al-Suffah, those who lived in the portico of the Prophet's Mosque in voluntary poverty while devoted to worship, are frequently cited by historians of Sufism as the prototype of the first Sufi community in Islamic history.

Beyond the Middle East, the birthplace of Islam, Sufis also made significant contributions to Southeast Asia by spreading Islamic teachings and values and helping to protect the region from colonialism. Anthony Johns, in several of his writings, argues that Sufi missionaries who accompanied Muslim traders played a crucial role in the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia (Bruinessen, 2009). This view aligns with prevailing theories regarding the arrival of Islam in the region, including the Gujarati, Arab, Persian, and Chinese theories. Despite their differences, these theories share common strategies

or media: trade, politics, and economics. However, one strategy that is often overlooked is the religious strategy of Sufism, also known as mysticism (Masyhudi, 2001).

In modern scholarship, historians generally agree that none of the theories regarding the arrival of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago is the most accurate or least accurate. One important thing is that Islam entered Indonesia (the Southeast Asian region) peacefully (Hidayat, 2023). One theory complements another, meaning that Islam entered and developed in Indonesia through the roles of various parties. This includes traders from various regions (Arab, Gujarat, Persia), networks of scholars, and Sufi preaching. In this regard, it is interesting to note that after being spread by traders, Islam was then continued by Da'i (preachers) and Sufi travelers, also known as Anthony Johns' Sufi Theory (Hasanah & Rama, 2025). These figures include Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, Abdul Qadir al-Jailani, and Ibn Arabi, renowned Sufi figures whose lives coincided with the Islamization of the archipelago. Among the Sufi figures who played a role in the spread of Islam in the archipelago was Sheikh Abdullah Arif, a pioneer in Aceh. According to several sources, Sheikh Abdullah Arif came from Arabia (Yemen), and came to Aceh with Sheikh Ismail Zaffi, and began spreading Islam around 1177 (Nur & Abdurahman, 2017).

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the development of Sufism in the Indonesian archipelago was marked by the emergence of Sheikh Abdullah Arif's work, Bahrul Lahut. Accordingly, it can be said that Sufi thought during this period tended toward the wujudiyah (existential unity) school. Although some argued that its teachings were grounded in the tradition of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah and even linked to an intellectual connection with Abdul Qadir al-Jailani, several passages in Bahrul Lahut also reflect the influence of Shia doctrine. Thus, the Sufi tradition that developed during this period was dominated by wujudiyah thought, which then continued and evolved in subsequent centuries through figures such as Hamzah Fansuri, Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani, Abdurrauf Singkil, Burhanuddin Ulakan, Yusuf al-Makassari, and Siti Jenar (Nur & Abdurahman, 2017).

The activities of these Sufis in spreading Islam throughout the Indonesian archipelago proved to be readily accepted by local communities. Beyond Anthony Johns, Fatimi has also reconstructed various complex explanations and concluded that the Islamization process in Indonesia was similarly centered on Sufi figures. This is supported by evidence that Sufis of the time possessed profound knowledge of Sufism, possessed spiritual authority, and were capable of integrating and utilizing elements of pre-Islamic culture within an Islamic framework (syncretism) (Arifin, 2018). One of the primary media through which Sufis and Sufi orders spread Islam in Indonesia was education. Through education, the teachings of Sufi orders were systematically transmitted to students and local communities alike.

Sufi Orders as Centers of Islamic Learning

In the Indonesian archipelago, Islamic education has long been a vital component of the Islamization process since the thirteenth century. As previously noted, in this process, the figures and institutions involved in spreading Islam did not limit themselves to religious teaching alone; they also established educational institutions, facilitated the internalization of local values, and adapted curricula to suit the cultural context of local communities. Sufi orders, through their Sufi teachings (*tasawuf*), became one of the most important agents in the spread of Islam in Indonesia through education, a role most visibly marked by the establishment of the pesantren. There are various views regarding

the origins of the pesantren in the Indonesian archipelago, one of which holds that pesantren is rooted in the Islamic tradition of Sufi orders (Faridah, 2021).

Pesantren maintains a very close relationship with the educational traditions of the Sufis. This can be seen in the early process of the spread of Islam in Indonesia, which was largely carried out through the activities of Sufi orders (Anita, 2022). The presence of Sufi orders was marked by the formation of religious communities that practiced specific forms of *dhikr* and *litany* under the guidance of a spiritual leader known as a *kiai*, *khalifah*, or *mursyid*. In some Sufi orders, followers were required to undertake a period of spiritual seclusion (*suluk*) lasting forty days per year, residing with fellow members of the order within a mosque compound to perform various acts of worship and spiritual exercises. To support these activities, the *kiai* provided dedicated spaces as temporary residences and other supporting facilities around the mosque. In addition to guiding Sufi practices, followers were also taught various religious texts covering different branches of Islamic knowledge. These learning activities became known as *pengajian* (religious study sessions). Over time, the tradition of *pengajian* that developed within Sufi order communities underwent institutional growth and eventually gave rise to the pesantren educational system (Hasbullah, 1995).

In the history of Islamic dissemination in the Indonesian archipelago, Sufi orders occupied a highly strategic position as centers of informal education and as the backbone of Islamic knowledge transmission, long before formal educational institutions came into existence. Unlike educational systems that rely on administrative structures and written curricula, Sufi orders offered a more organic learning environment rooted in personal relationships between teachers and students, and one that engaged dimensions of life far deeper than mere knowledge transfer (Trimingham, 1971). This system not only taught the ritual aspects of Islam but also shaped the epistemological framework of Muslim communities in the archipelago in their holistic understanding of Islam.

As noted by Azra (2004), the network of *ulama* in the Indonesian archipelago during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was closely tied to their affiliations with various Sufi orders, particularly the Qadiriyyah, Naqsyabandiyah, and Syattariyyah. Scholars who had completed their education in Mecca and Medina returned to the archipelago carrying the teachings and *ijazah* (spiritual licenses) from their teachers in the Middle East, and subsequently established teaching centers that functioned substantively as institutions of informal Islamic education. This phenomenon gave rise to what Azra (2004) describes as a “network of scholars” connecting the Indonesian archipelago with centers of Islamic learning in Haramayn and other parts of the Middle East, a network that was not merely intellectual in nature, but also constituted a living spiritual and pedagogical infrastructure.

Another important aspect that distinguishes informal education within the Sufi order tradition from other educational models is its freedom from fixed spaces and times. Education in Sufi orders took place continuously (in the *surau*, in the sheikh’s home, along journeys, and even during everyday communal activities). This is precisely what made the pedagogical influence of Sufi orders far more pervasive than systems of education confined to school hours and classroom walls (Hasbullah, 1995). Furthermore, the practice of *dhikr* and *pengajian* within the Sufi order tradition was more than mere religious ritual; both served as effective educational media and as the primary vehicles for the transmission of Islamic knowledge in the archipelago. *Dhikr*, which literally means the remembrance of God, functioned in the context of Sufi education as a method

for cultivating spiritual awareness while simultaneously reinforcing students' internalization of Islamic teachings (Nasution, 1985). The study of classical texts, from al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* and Ibn 'Ata'illah al-Iskandari's *al-Hikam* to works produced by local ulama of the archipelago, formed the core of educational activity within Sufi order communities.

Bruinessen (1992), in his comprehensive study of the Naqsyabandiyah in Indonesia, observed that regular gatherings of Sufi order communities, whether in the form of dhikr assemblies or scriptural study sessions (*pengajian kitab*), consistently transmitted Islamic values to a broad cross-section of society. These activities were not restricted to the religious elite but were open to people of various social strata, thus exerting a far-reaching impact on Islamic literacy at the grassroots level. In this regard, dhikr assemblies served a dual function: as acts of worship and simultaneously as forums for collective learning that made no distinctions based on participants' socioeconomic backgrounds (Bruinessen, 1992).

One particularly noteworthy aspect is how dhikr indirectly cultivated the capacities for concentration, self-discipline, and value internalization, competencies that in contemporary educational terminology fall under the categories of soft skills and affective learning. In other words, the dhikr tradition within Sufi orders had long been practicing a model of holistic learning that has only recently begun to receive recognition in contemporary educational discourse (Nata, 2011).

One of the most distinctive features of the Sufi order educational system is the centrality of the teacher-student relationship (*shaykh-murid*). This relationship extends far beyond the mere transfer of academic knowledge; it is a total spiritual bond that engages the entirety of the student's personality. Dhofier (1982) notes that within the pesantren tradition, which is historically rooted in Sufi practice, the authority of the kiai as mursyid (spiritual guide) is deeply central to the formation of students' character and knowledge. Complete trust in the teacher is not regarded as intellectual weakness, but rather as an epistemological prerequisite for the deep absorption of knowledge (Dhofier, 1982).

The concept of *suhbah* (spiritual companionship and proximity between teacher and student) constitutes the core of the educational process within Sufi orders. It is through *suhbah* that the transmission of knowledge that cannot be contained in books takes place, knowledge pertaining to *adab* (etiquette), *akhlaq* (character), practical wisdom, and spiritual experience that can only be lived, not merely learned intellectually (Hasbullah, 1995). Students who lived alongside their teachers for years underwent a far more comprehensive process of character formation than could be achieved through formal learning alone. The teacher-student relationship within the Sufi order tradition also creates a high degree of moral accountability. A student is bound not only to study the teacher's teachings but also to practice them and transmit them to the next generation. This continuity ensures that the scholarly tradition not only endures but continues to grow organically from generation to generation (Trimingham, 1971)

The primary focus of education within Sufi orders is moral and spiritual development, referred to in Sufi terminology as *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul). Unlike modern educational systems, which tend to prioritize cognitive achievement and technical competencies, education within Sufi orders places moral transformation as the highest aim of the learning process (Nata, 2011). This process involves a series of rigorous spiritual exercises, including voluntary fasting, night prayers (*qiyam al-layl*), self-

examination (*muhasabah*), and various forms of inner struggle (*mujahadah*) designed to diminish the ego and purify the motivations behind one's actions. The influence of Sufism on the formation of community character is profound and enduring. Members of Sufi orders do not merely study spiritual doctrines in a textual manner; they internalize values such as *qana'ah* (contentment), *wara'* (scrupulousness in conduct), *sabr* (patience), and *tawakkal* (trust in God) as the ethical foundations of their social lives. This internalization of values in turn shapes the character of Muslim communities who possess moral standards that are socially recognized and respected.

Beyond the institutions of pesantren and the concepts of *dhikr*, *suhbah*, and *tazkiyat al-nafs*, the concept of *sanad* (the chain of scholarly transmission) also deserves attention. The *sanad* is one of the most important contributions of the Islamic educational system, and in the context of Sufi orders, it carries a spiritual dimension that extends far beyond mere academic legitimacy. Every shaykh possesses a chain of transmission that connects his teachings and spiritual authority to the founder of the order, and ultimately to the Prophet Muhammad (Trimingham, 1971). This system not only guarantees the authenticity of the teachings but also creates a powerful sense of historical continuity and collective identity among the followers.

Azra (2004) demonstrates that this network of *sanad* played an instrumental role in transmitting authentic Islamic knowledge to the Indonesian archipelago. Scholars from the archipelago such as Shaykh 'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Singkili and Shaykh Yusuf al-Maqassari, whose scholarly chains were connected to major teachers in Mecca, Medina, and Yemen, were recognized as Islamic authorities both at the local level and within international scholarly networks. It is the possession of the *sanad* that distinguished legitimately recognized scholars from ordinary religious teachers, and that conferred upon education within Sufi orders a high degree of authority in the eyes of Muslim communities throughout the archipelago (Azra, 2004).

Educational Methods Used by Sufi Orders

Oral instruction is the most dominant method in the Sufi order educational system, reflecting the broader Islamic scholarly tradition in which oral transmission is considered more authentic and reliable than written transmission alone. A student who merely read a text without having heard it directly from a competent teacher was not considered to truly possess that knowledge. Such a student was regarded as no more than a *warraq* (a reader of texts) rather than an 'alim (a person of genuine knowledge) (Hasbullah, 1995). This tradition is deeply rooted in the practice of hadith transmission, in which oral chains of narration (*isnad*) serve as the guarantors of authenticity.

In practice, oral instruction within Sufi orders encompassed the recitation and explanation of classical texts (*syarh* and *ta'liq*), the transmission of litanies (*wirid*) that students were required to practice, and the explanation of the esoteric meanings of Islamic teachings that were not to be disseminated indiscriminately. Abdullah (1987) notes that the tradition of the *halaqah* (learning circle) conducted orally was not only effective in transmitting knowledge but also created a cohesive and mutually supportive learning community. Beyond that, this method possessed a certain inclusive value, as it could be accessed even by those who had not yet acquired literacy skills.

In Sufi epistemology, knowledge that is not accompanied by practice (*'amal*) is considered worthless, or even a burden that will weigh heavily in the hereafter. Therefore, the exemplary conduct of the teacher constitutes an educational method no

less important than the verbal transmission of content. Students learn not only from what their teachers say, but from how their teachers live, their attitudes, and their everyday conduct (Dhofier, 1982). This concept is known in the Sufi tradition as *uswah hasanah* (exemplary conduct), referring to the prophetic model that made lived example the primary pedagogical method.

Sufi order shaykhs are generally known not merely for the depth of their knowledge, but above all for the nobility of their character and the simplicity of their daily lives. Steenbrink (1986), in his study of the pesantren institution, notes that the influence of a *kiai* derives not solely from intellectual authority, but from the personal charisma that flows from piety and exemplary conduct. Students who observe their teacher's life directly over many years undergo a far more comprehensive process of character formation than can be achieved through formal instruction alone, a process that in contemporary education is referred to as the hidden curriculum, but which in the Sufi order tradition is in fact the most primary curriculum (Steenbrink, 1986).

Spiritual discipline is the most distinctive and irreplaceable pedagogical component of the Sufi order educational system. Riyadhah (systematic spiritual training), *suluk* (intensive spiritual retreat), and various forms of self-discipline constitute educational methods designed to fundamentally transform the character of the student, rather than merely broaden his intellectual horizons (Nasution, 1985). This method rests on a profound assumption: that genuine knowledge of spiritual reality cannot be attained through intellectual study alone, but requires a transformation of the inner state achieved through consistent practice.

Suluk (literally meaning "to travel a path") is one of the most intensive educational methods in the Sufi order tradition. During the *suluk* period, a student enters into seclusion (*khalwat*) to concentrate on dhikr, acts of worship, and self-examination under the direct guidance of his teacher (Bruinessen, 1992). This period of spiritual isolation may last forty days (*arba'in*) or even longer, depending on the tradition of each particular order. Such intensive experiences frequently produce profound transformations of character. The experiences of *kashf* (spiritual unveiling), *tawbah* (deep repentance), or an increase in *yaqin* (certainty) stand as evidence of the effectiveness of this method as an instrument of character education.

The collective dimension of learning within the Sufi order tradition represents a social-pedagogical aspect that is frequently overlooked in academic studies of traditional Islamic education. The practice of communal dhikr assemblies and *pengajian* creates a mutually supportive and motivating learning environment. Within this collective space, students learn not only from their teacher, but also from fellow students who are at various stages of their own spiritual journeys (Zulkifli, 2002). The informal exchange of experiences among fellow students, occurring in the interstices of formal gatherings, gives rise to a dynamic learning community, a concept that in contemporary educational theory is considered ideal, but which the Sufi order tradition has practiced for centuries. Abdullah (1987) demonstrates that the collective dimension of Sufi order education carries social implications that extend far beyond the religious sphere. The bonds of brotherhood (*ukhuwwah*) formed within *pengajian* circles and dhikr assemblies do not remain at the spiritual level alone; they also create solid social and economic networks among community members. In certain historical contexts, these networks served as the infrastructure for social mobilization, including in movements of resistance against colonialism (Kartodirdjo, 1984).

Memorization (*hifzh*) is one of the most fundamental educational methods in the Islamic scholarly tradition, and within the context of Sufi orders, this method is applied not only to normative texts such as the Qur'an and hadith, but also to litanies (*wirid*), special prayer formulas (*hizb*), structured sequences of dhikr (*ratib*), and esoteric teachings deemed too sensitive to be committed to writing (Dhofier, 1982). Memorization in this context is not merely a memory exercise; it is a process of internalization aimed at making these teachings an integral part of the student's consciousness and identity.

The practice of repeated and disciplined worship (*ta'lim* through '*amal*') represents a unique pedagogical dimension of Sufi education. Through the disciplined repetition of specific acts of worship, students do not merely acquire technical skills in religious practice; they undergo a transformation of consciousness that constitutes the ultimate goal of spiritual education (Nata, 2011). This perspective aligns with al-Ghazali's argument that true knowledge (*al-'ilm al-nafi'*) must produce changes in behavior ('*amal*') and inner condition (*hal*), rather than merely accumulating intellectual knowledge that changes nothing within the person.

Tabel 1. Pedagogical Methods of Sufi Orders and Their Institutional Applications in the Indonesian Archipelago

Nu	Pedagogical Method	Main Characteristics	Educational Objective	Institutional Application
1	Suhbah (spiritual companionship)	Intensive teacher-student relationship based on proximity, guidance, and exemplary conduct	Character formation, transmission of adab, akhlaq, and practical wisdom	Pesantren, surau, tarekat lodges, informal study circles
2	Dhikr Assemblies	Collective remembrance practices combined with religious instruction	Internalization of Islamic values and spiritual awareness	Tarekat communities, mosques, pesantren
3	Pengajian Kitab (textual study sessions)	Oral transmission and explanation of classical Islamic texts	Religious literacy and transmission of Islamic knowledge	Pesantren, surau, mosque-based learning centers
4	Riyadhah (spiritual discipline)	Structured spiritual exercises such as fasting, night prayers, and self-discipline	Purification of the soul (<i>tazkiyat al-nafs</i>) and moral transformation	Tarekat communities, pesantren
5	Suluk (spiritual retreat)	Intensive seclusion under direct supervision of a shaykh or mursyid	Deep spiritual transformation and character development	Surau, pesantren, tarekat retreat centers
6	Hifzh (memorization)	Memorization of Qur'an, wirid, ratib, hizb, and doctrinal teachings	Internalization and preservation of knowledge	Pesantren, surau, tarekat circles
7	Ta'lim through 'Amal (learning through practice)	Repetitive worship and embodied religious practice	Transformation of behavior and consciousness	Daily religious life within tarekat and pesantren communities
8	Collective Learning Networks	Peer learning through communal dhikr and study circles	Social learning, solidarity, and community formation	Tarekat associations, pesantren, surau

Source: Author's analysis based on various sources.

The Role of Sufi Orders in Educational Transformation

One of the most concrete and measurable contributions of Sufi order communities to educational transformation in the Indonesian archipelago is the promotion of Islamic literacy among the broader population. The ability to read the Qur'an, which was a prerequisite for meaningful participation in various religious activities, including scriptural study sessions (*pengajian kitab*) and dhikr assemblies within Sufi circles, drove an increase in Arabic-Jawi literacy rates across various regions of the archipelago (Hasbullah, 1995). This process did not occur through formal educational institutions in the modern sense, but rather through informal teaching networks distributed throughout the archipelago and initiated by Sufi order communities.

Al-Attas (1970), in his study of the mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri, demonstrates that the literary tradition that developed within the Sufi environment of Aceh in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries produced an extraordinarily rich body of literary and intellectual works. Sufi writers of the archipelago (such as Hamzah Fansuri, Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani, and 'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Singkili) produced works not only in Arabic but also in Malay, thereby significantly expanding the reach of Islamic literacy to communities that lacked proficiency in Arabic (Al-Attas, 1970). This represented both an intellectual breakthrough and a brilliant pedagogical strategy: bringing Islamic knowledge closer to the people in the language they understood, without sacrificing the depth of the subject matter.

The relationship between the Sufi order tradition and the growth of Islamic educational institutions such as the pesantren in Java and the surau in West Sumatra is one of the most widely studied and debated aspects in the historiography of Islamic education in Indonesia (Muchlas, 2024). Dhofier (1982) argues persuasively that the pesantren (as the most distinctive and influential Islamic educational institution in Indonesia) emerged from a synthesis of pre-Islamic local educational traditions and the educational system brought by Sufi scholars. The character of the pesantren, which places the kiai as the sole mursyid and authority, while emphasizing character formation above mere academic achievement, reflects the profound influence of the Sufi pedagogical tradition.

Dobbin (1983), in his study of the Padri movement in West Sumatra, notes that the network of surau (which served as centers of education and social life in Minangkabau) was deeply rooted in the Sufi tradition, particularly that of the Naqsyabandiyah. Prior to the emergence of the reformist-oriented Padri movement, the surau in Minangkabau functioned as centers of Sufi instruction as well as integrated institutions for Qur'anic and jurisprudential education within a single community (Dobbin, 1983). The transformation of the surau from a center of Sufism into a more modern and structured educational institution constitutes part of a long process of negotiation between Sufi traditionalism and Islamic reformism in the Indonesian archipelago, a process that involved productive tensions between two differing educational visions.

The role of Sufi orders in shaping Islamic social ethics represents a dimension of educational transformation that extends beyond the boundaries of any formal educational institution. Through sustained teaching and practice, Sufi order communities became agents of moral habitus formation that influenced not only their individual members but also the wider surrounding society (Simuh, 1988). Values such as honesty, solidarity, justice, and compassion for others (emphasized in Sufi teachings) gradually

shaped the social ethics of Muslim communities throughout the Indonesian archipelago, a process that unfolded slowly but proved profoundly influential over the long term.

Ricklefs (2006) demonstrates that the process of “Islamization” in Javanese society cannot be understood solely in terms of the adoption of formal rituals and doctrines, but must be understood as a process of moral and cultural transformation that took place gradually and in complex ways. In this process, Sufi order communities played the role of mediators who translated Islamic norms into the local cultural reality, producing forms of social ethics that organically integrated Islamic values with local wisdom (M. C., 2001). The result was a Muslim community with a distinctive ethical character: deeply religious in its inner life, yet firmly rooted in its own cultural identity.

One of the most prominent aspects of the Sufi orders’ contribution to educational transformation is their ability to harmoniously integrate Islamic teachings with local culture. Sufi shaykhs, who had generally lived among the local communities for extended periods and developed a deep understanding of local culture, possessed the capacity to convey Islamic teachings through cultural idioms that local communities could comprehend and accept (Abdullah, 1987). Although not without theological debate, this inculturative pedagogical strategy proved highly effective as a means of spreading Islam peacefully and in a deeply rooted manner, far different from confrontational approaches that tend to generate resistance.

Simuh (1988) notes that the Javanese Sufi tradition, which developed within pesantren communities and Sufi order circles, succeeded in creating a unique synthesis between Islamic values and Javanese spiritual traditions. Works of Javanese literature that fused Javanese aesthetics with Islamic content represent the product of a process of cultural integration facilitated by the Sufi tradition. This process not only enriched the cultural heritage of Java but also deepened the practice of Islam among communities that had previously known Islam only superficially. Across the broader Indonesian archipelago, similar patterns can be observed in various regions (such as Aceh, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and other areas) where Sufism served as a bridge between Islam as a universal religion and the rich particularities of local cultural identity (Simuh, 1996). Simuh's statement is also supported by C. Henry's report that the Sufi order movement had a fairly well-organized network spread across several cities on the island of Java (Hidayat et al., 2009).

The educational transformation initiated by Sufi order communities ultimately produced a class of local ulama possessed of scholarly competence and broadly recognized moral authority. These scholars, who had undergone a long educational process within the Sufi tradition, often reinforced by direct study in Mecca and Medina, became the intellectual and spiritual leaders of Muslim communities throughout the Indonesian archipelago (Azra, 2004). The emergence of this local scholarly elite was highly significant, as it created the capacity for an independent reproduction of scholarship that was no longer entirely dependent on an influx of teachers from outside.

Bruinessen (1992) demonstrates that the network of scholars affiliated with the Naqsyabandiyah in Indonesia encompassed thousands of figures spread across the entire archipelago, constituting a form of “scholarly aristocracy” that exercised considerable influence over social, religious, and even political life. The local scholarly elite produced by the Sufi order educational system did not function only as educators and spiritual leaders within their communities; they frequently also served as pivots of resistance against external influences (whether colonial or cultural) that were perceived as

threatening the integrity of Muslim communities. In a broader sense, the emergence of this local scholarly elite represents one of the most enduring and significant impacts of the educational system built by Sufi order communities throughout the Indonesian archipelago.

Challenges and Continuity

The arrival of Dutch colonialism brought dramatic changes to the Islamic educational ecosystem in the Indonesian archipelago, including the educational system established by Sufi order communities. The colonial government viewed Sufi order networks with deep suspicion, given the role played by certain Sufi organizations (particularly the Qadiriyyah wa Naqsyabandiyah) in mobilizing resistance against colonial authority (Kartodirdjo, 1984). The Banten Rebellion of 1888, which in Kartodirdjo's analysis demonstrates the involvement of Sufi order networks as the organizational infrastructure of resistance, stands as one of the most dramatic examples of the politicization of Sufi educational networks in the colonial context.

Steenbrink (1986) notes that Dutch colonial policy toward Islamic education reflected a considerable degree of ambivalence. On the one hand, the Dutch did not explicitly prohibit Islamic education, including that based on Sufi orders. On the other hand, through various regulations governing education and public associations, including the Guru Ordinance, which required religious teachers to register themselves, the colonial government effectively curtailed the operational space available to Islamic educational institutions. The introduction of a secular-oriented Western educational system also gradually displaced the dominance of the Sufi order-based educational system among segments of society with aspirations for social mobility, since only those who received a Western education could access positions within the colonial bureaucracy.

The twentieth century witnessed a powerful wave of Islamic reformism in Indonesia, inspired by the Wahhabi movement in Arabia and the Egyptian reformism pioneered by Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Rida. These reformist movements, represented in Indonesia by Muhammadiyah (founded in 1912) and Persatuan Islam (founded in 1923), explicitly criticized various Sufi order practices as *bid'ah* (unwarranted innovations) and *khurafat* (baseless beliefs) that ought to be abandoned (Noer, 1980). This criticism was not only theological in nature but also pedagogical: the Sufi order educational system was considered inadequate in preparing Muslims to face the challenges of modernity, as it was regarded as overly focused on the inner and spiritual dimensions while neglecting intellectual and social dimensions deemed more urgent.

Noer (1973) demonstrates that the debate between traditionalists and modern reformists constitutes one of the central themes in the history of twentieth-century Indonesian Islam. This debate was not merely a theological disagreement but also a contest for influence over Islamic educational institutions and for the definition of what constitutes "properly Islamic education." The founding of Nahdlatul Ulama in 1926 was in large part a response to this reformist pressure, an organized effort to preserve the legitimacy of the Sufi order tradition and the jurisprudence of the classical legal schools within an Islamic landscape increasingly shaped by reformist discourse.

In addition to criticism from modern reformist circles, the Sufi order tradition also faced various critiques from within the Muslim community itself. The most frequently raised issues encompassed several core matters. First, there were allegations that certain strands of Sufi thought, particularly those emphasizing *wahdatul wujud* (the unity of

being), contained elements potentially at variance with orthodox Islamic doctrine. Second, there were concerns regarding the potential misuse of authority by shaykhs who wielded enormous influence over their students, authority that in some cases was directed toward political or economic ends. Third, there were questions about the relevance of Sufi order curricula and educational methods in addressing the increasingly complex challenges of modernity (Nasution, 1985).

Zulkifli (2002) notes that responses to these critiques have varied among different Sufi order communities. Some sought to adapt by integrating elements of modern education into their systems, establishing formal schools, sending cadres to universities, and publishing more contemporary da'wah literature. Others chose to preserve their traditions more strictly, arguing that it is precisely the uniqueness and spiritual integrity of the Sufi order educational system that constitutes the source of its appeal and benefit, something that would be lost if too many concessions were made to modern standards.

Despite facing considerable pressures and challenges, Sufi orders in Indonesia have demonstrated a remarkable degree of resilience and adaptability. Various studies indicate that the number of Sufi order followers in Indonesia (well into the twenty-first century) remains very large, with major orders such as Qadiriyyah wa Naqsyabandiyah, Naqsyabandiyah Haqqaniyyah, and Tijaniyyah numbering millions of followers distributed across the entire archipelago (Bruinessen, 1992). This phenomenon suggests that rather than being eroded by the currents of modernization, Sufi orders have in fact experienced a significant revival, a paradox that merits further scholarly investigation.

The revival of Sufi orders in the modern era can be understood as a response to the spiritual vacuum left by modernization and the secularization of social life. In the context of an increasingly individualistic and materialistic urban society, Sufi order communities offer spaces of brotherhood (*ukhuwwah*), personalized spiritual guidance, and existential depth that are difficult to find elsewhere (Abdullah, 1987). From an educational perspective, this revival indicates that the core pedagogical values of the Sufi order tradition, the personal and deep teacher-student relationship, an orientation toward holistic character formation, and the integration of knowledge and practice, remain highly relevant and urgently needed within the landscape of contemporary Islamic education.

Discussion

The study of the role of Sufi orders in the transformation of Islamic education in the Indonesian archipelago opens rich and layered perspectives on the historical dynamics of Islamic education in Indonesia. From the series of analyses presented above, several broader interpretive theses can be formulated. First, the dichotomy between "formal education" and "informal education" commonly employed in contemporary educational studies is insufficient for capturing the complexity of the Sufi order educational system. The educational system developed by Sufi order communities in the Indonesian archipelago possessed a clear structure, an organized curriculum (even if not always articulated in written documents) and consistent methodologies with measurable outcomes in terms of character formation (Hasbullah, 1995). In many respects, this system was far more "structured" than the modern analytical categories tend to assume. What distinguished it from formal education was not its lack of systematization, but rather the different locus and ultimate aims it pursued.

Second, the educational transformation initiated by Sufi orders in the Indonesian archipelago cannot be understood merely as a process of disseminating religious knowledge in a narrow technical sense. It represents a broader process of social transformation, encompassing moral character formation, the construction of communal identity, the production of an intellectual elite, and the negotiation between the universal values of Islam and the particularities of local culture (Azra, 2004). In this sense, Sufi orders functioned as agents of social transformation operating through educational mechanisms, not merely as religious organizations that incidentally provided educational services. This difference in perspective is significant, as it determines how we analyze the impact and legacy of Sufi orders in Indonesian history.

Third, the relationship between Sufi orders and the modernization of Islamic education needs to be situated (Idris, 2026), within a more nuanced framework than a simple narrative of “tradition versus modernity.” As demonstrated by Bruinessen (1992) and Zulkifli (2002), many Sufi order communities have succeeded in integrating elements of modern pedagogy into their traditions without losing their spiritual essence. This relatively high degree of adaptability suggests that the tension between tradition and modernity, which is frequently portrayed as confrontational, is in practice more often a process of negotiation and dialectical exchange. Sufi orders have not passively succumbed to change, nor have they been fully absorbed by it; they have negotiated from a position grounded in clear identities and values.

Fourth, the pedagogical relevance of the Sufi order tradition in the context of contemporary Islamic education deserves to be re-evaluated with greater seriousness and openness. Several core principles of the Sufi order educational system, the emphasis on character building, the importance of sustained personal mentorship, the integration of knowledge and practice, and attention to the spiritual and affective dimensions of learning, are precisely the principles that educational reformers today are actively seeking, as they grow increasingly critical of educational models that are excessively cognitive, competitive, and transactional in orientation (Nata, 2011). There is an instructive irony here: while the mainstream of modern education struggles to rediscover holistic values in learning, the Sufi order tradition has long been practicing them.

Fifth, this study demonstrates that the success of Sufi orders as agents of educational transformation is inseparable from their capacity to build authentic learning communities, communities in which knowledge is experienced together, rather than merely transferred in one direction. The communal dimension of Sufi order education, reflected in the practice of dhikr assemblies, communal study sessions, and shared life within a single community, creates an environment conducive to genuinely transformative learning. In the language of contemporary education, this is precisely what is meant by an authentic learning community, a concept that within the Sufi order tradition is not a theoretical idea but a lived reality that has endured for centuries.

Ultimately, a deeper and more balanced understanding of the historical role of Sufi orders in the transformation of Islamic education in the Indonesian archipelago holds value not only at the academic level, but also carries practical implications for Islamic education policy and development in Indonesia. Recognizing the pedagogical heritage of Sufi orders as an integral part of the Islamic educational tradition of the archipelago can open pathways toward more holistic and contextually grounded approaches to building an Islamic educational system capable of meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century without losing its deep spiritual roots.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding

This study demonstrates that Sufi orders (tarekat) played a foundational and irreplaceable role in the transformation of Islamic education across the Indonesian archipelago. Far from being merely peripheral religious organizations, Sufi orders functioned as sophisticated pedagogical institutions that systematically transmitted Islamic knowledge long before formal educational structures existed. Through an integrated educational ecosystem encompassing oral instruction, spiritual discipleship (suhbah), collective learning (majelis zikir and pengajian), and intensive spiritual training (suluk and riyadhah), Sufi orders cultivated not only religious literacy but also deep moral character formation among Muslim communities throughout the Indonesian archipelago. The sanad system ensured the authenticity and continuity of knowledge transmission, while the organic teacher-student relationship produced generations of locally rooted ulama who became the intellectual and spiritual backbone of Indonesian Muslim society. Crucially, the emergence of pesantren in Java and surau in West Sumatra as the most enduring institutions of Islamic education in Indonesia cannot be understood apart from this Sufi pedagogical heritage.

Implication

The pedagogical legacy of Sufi orders carries profound implications for contemporary Islamic education in Indonesia. At a moment when modern education systems are increasingly criticized for their overemphasis on cognitive achievement and transactional learning, the Sufi order tradition offers a long-practiced alternative model—one that integrates intellectual development with character formation, spiritual depth, and communal accountability. The principles that defined Sufi pedagogy for centuries, namely sustained personal mentorship, the inseparability of knowledge and practice (*ilm* and *'amal*), holistic character development (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), and the cultivation of authentic learning communities, are precisely the values that contemporary educational reformers are now struggling to reintroduce into modern curricula. The irony is instructive: what educational theory is only beginning to conceptualize as authentic learning communities and affective learning, the Sufi order tradition has practiced for hundreds of years. Recognizing this heritage as a legitimate and sophisticated educational tradition (rather than a pre-modern relic) could open more contextually grounded and spiritually coherent pathways for developing Indonesian Islamic education in the twenty-first century.

Limitation

The main limitation of this study is its dependence on secondary literature, it therefore requires further support from research grounded primarily in primary sources. Furthermore, this study, while drawing on a broad range of historical and sociological scholarship, is primarily a literature-based analysis and does not incorporate direct empirical fieldwork within living Sufi order communities. As a result, the dynamics of contemporary Sufi educational practice, including how specific orders have adapted their pedagogical methods in response to digital modernity, urbanization, and shifting student demographics, remain underexplored. Additionally, the study tends to treat “Sufi order” as a relatively unified category, whereas significant doctrinal, methodological, and regional variations exist among orders such as the Qadiriyyah wa Naqsyabandiyah, Syattariyyah, and Tijaniyyah, each of which developed distinct educational cultures and

institutional responses to historical pressures. These internal diversities deserve more granular attention than the present study was able to provide.

Future Research

Several directions merit further scholarly attention. First, comparative ethnographic studies are needed to examine how individual Sufi order communities are actively navigating the tension between preserving their spiritual-pedagogical traditions and adapting to the demands of contemporary education. Second, the intersection of gender and Sufi education in the Indonesian archipelago remains significantly understudied. The role of women within Sufi order learning circles and the extent to which they participated in or were excluded from the pedagogical networks described in this study warrants dedicated investigation. Third, the digital transformation of Sufi order communities (the emergence of online dhikr assemblies, virtual suluk programs, and social media-based Sufi networks) presents a genuinely novel phenomenon that challenges traditional assumptions about the necessity of physical co-presence in Sufi learning. Finally, longitudinal studies examining the measurable impact of Sufi-rooted education on graduates' moral behavior, social capital, and civic engagement would help bridge the gap between the rich historical claims made about Sufi orders' transformative power and empirically verifiable outcomes in the present day. Such research would not only enrich the historiography of Islamic education in Indonesia but also contribute meaningfully to broader global conversations about the role of spirituality and character in education.

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