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Reassessing Sayyid Usman bin Yahya's Critique of Sufism in Contemporary Indonesia

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Abstract: The transformation of Sufi practices within Indonesia's urban setting has prompted sustained discussions concerning religious authority, orthodoxy, and engagement with modernity. In Jakarta, the rise of neo-Sufism, urban Sufism, and digitally mediated religiosity illustrates the dynamic interaction between continuity and change in Islamic spiritual traditions. This study explores Sayyid Usman bin Yahya's nineteenth-century critique of Sufi practices and examines its relevance to the development of modern Islamic thought in Jakarta. Utilizing library research and qualitative content analysis, the study engages with Sayyid Usman's primary texts alongside contemporary scholarly works on Sufism. The findings indicate that his opposition to religious innovations, superstitious practices, and the excessive veneration of spiritual authorities played a significant role in shaping a Sharia-oriented model of urban Sufism. This model emphasizes the primacy of the Qur'an and Hadith, promotes rational engagement in spiritual life, and demonstrates adaptability to metropolitan social conditions. By connecting classical critiques of local Sufi traditions with contemporary forms of urban religiosity, this study addresses an important gap in the literature and contributes to broader discussions on Islamic education, digital da'wah, and Muslim identity formation in modern urban contexts.

Keywords: *Sayyid Usman bin Yahya, criticism of Sufism, contemporary Sufism, digital Sufism, urban Islam.*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Islamic studies in Indonesia cannot be separated from the intellectual legacy of nineteenth-century Nusantara scholars, whose ideas continue to shape religious discourse and practice in modern urban contexts.

This period marked a crucial phase in the formation of urban Muslim religiosity, particularly in Batavia (now Jakarta), which functioned as a central hub of social, political, and cultural interaction in the Dutch East Indies. Debates concerning the relationship between sharia, tarekat, and Sufism emerged prominently during this era and remain relevant in contemporary discussions on urban and digital religiosity.

One of the figures who had a Significant Influence on the formation of religious discourse in Batavia was Sayyid Usman bin Yahya bin Abdullah bin Aqil bin Yahya (1822–1914), a Hadrami scholar, who was called *Honorary Advisor for Arab Affairs* or Honorary Adviser on Arab Affairs (Noupal, 2014). Apart from being an honorary advisor, Sayyid Usman is known as a Betawi mufti who had broad scientific authority and whose works can reach people across social classes (Azra, 1995).

His works include the Book of *Manasik Hajj, Manhaj al-Istiqamah fi al-Din al-Salamah, Maslak al-akhyar, Tuhfat al-Raghibin, Islah al-hal bi talab al-halal, Muhammad SAW, Bab al-Minan, Good Jewelry, Irsyadul Anam, Adab al-Insan, The Nature of Twenty, Maslak al-Akhyar fi al-Ad'iyah wa alazkar, Manhaj al-Istiqamah, 'Iqdu al-Juman fi Adab Recitation of the Qur'an, Jam'u al-Fawa'id, Taudhih Al-Adillati 'ala Syuruthi Al-Abillah, Al-Qawanin Ash-Syar'iyah li Ahl Al-Majalisi Al-Hukmiyah wal Iftaiyah, Al-Silisilah Al-Nabawiyah, Ta'bir Aqwa 'adillah, Jam Al-Fawaid, Zahr Al-Basyim, Ishlah Al-Hal, Al-Tuhfat Al-Wardiah, Genealogy of Alawiyah, Al-Thariq Al-Shahihah, Sa'adat Al-Anam, Nafais Al-Ihlah, Kitab al-Faraid, Saguna Sakaya, Muthala'ah, The Seven Benefits, The Marriage Sermon, Al-Qur'an wa Al-Du'a*, and several other books (Azra, 1995; Humaidi, 2023). The number of written works reaches 126 titles, both published and still in the form of manuscripts, and the publishing process is carried out through lithographic printing (Van Bruinessen, 1990).

Through the script *Fine Equipment*, for example, Sayyid Uthman emphasized the importance of cleansing the Faith and purifying practice so that religious practices do not deviate from the principles of tauhid and sharia (Abdullah, Ma'mur, Gunawan, & Syam, 2024; Dania, Kosasih, Ikhwan, & Ma'mun, 2024). The three works that contain his criticism are *al-Nasīḥat al-'Anīqah li al-Mutalabbisīn bi al-Ṭarīqah (Good Advice to Those Who Enter Tariqah)*, *al-Wathīqat al-Wāfiyyah fī 'Uluww Sha'n Ṭarīqah al-Ṣūfiyyah (The Belief That Conveys All That Is Haq in the Height of the Sufiyyah Tariqah)*, and *This is a Small Book to Find Out the Meaning of Tariqah in a Short*, representing his criticism of various forms of tarekat practices that, according to him, had the potential to give rise to bid'ah and individual cults to spiritual teachers (Azra, 2002).

Sayyid Uthman's critical stance was grounded in an epistemological framework that positioned the Qur'an and Hadith as the primary sources of

religious authority, thereby requiring all religious practices to possess clear normative legitimacy (Azra, 2016). In addition, his criticism was also influenced by the social context of Batavia during the colonial period, where the development of various tarekat with the practice of collective dhikr, baiat, and wirid is considered to have the potential to break the unity of the ummah (Azra, 1995; Laffan, 2011). Therefore, his criticism was both theological and sociological, aiming to reorganize religious practices to be more rational, measurable, and in accordance with the principles of pure monotheism (Azra, 2013; Laffan, 2011; Van den Berg & Van der Veur, 2007).

Sayyid Usman's thought became one of the important footholds in the development of contemporary Islamic studies in Jakarta, especially in reassessing the Practice of Sufism and the Tarekat within the framework of modernity. His criticism of the tarekat contributed to the birth of a more sophisticated style of study, rational, text-based, and adaptive to social dynamics. Howell (2000), analysis of urban Sufism highlights a shift toward more personal, sharia-oriented, and socially adaptive spiritual expressions, a trend further discussed by Fealy & White (2008).

More recent scholarship indicates that this transformation of urban Sufism has intensified in the context of rapid urbanization and digitalization. Studies show that contemporary Sufi practices in Indonesian cities are increasingly mediated by digital platforms, leading to new forms of religious authority, community formation, and spiritual expression. Ridwan, Harun, and Muhaimin (2024) demonstrate how Sufism adapts alongside Salafism in urban and digital environments, reflecting broader patterns of religious negotiation in modern cities. Similarly, Rosfiyanti, Wahidin, and Hannase (2024) find that urban tasawuf increasingly integrates cybermedia, producing digital religious communities while raising questions about spiritual authenticity. Zaki (2024) further explores how digital spiritual spaces reshape Sufi monotheism and interpretive frameworks, while studies on tarekat in the digital age reveal ongoing transformations in ritual practices and leadership models. These findings suggest that contemporary Sufism represents both continuity and renewal within changing socio-technological contexts.

Recent scholarship also shows that contemporary Sufism in urban Indonesia increasingly manifests as a form of spirituality that rejects bid'ah, superstition, and blind taqlid, while embracing rational, selective, and text-based religious practices. Fathuddin et al. (2023) identify urban Sufism as a growing trend among middle-class Muslims responding to the pressures of modern life. Ridwan et al. (2024) and Rozi et al. (2024) further document the transformation of traditional tarekat into more adaptive forms amid urbanization.

Despite the growing body of research on Sayyid Usman bin Yahya and

contemporary urban Sufism, existing studies remain largely fragmented. Earlier works tend to focus on his historical role, intellectual biography, or localized influence, such as his contribution to Betawi religious practices (Purnama & Mu'jizah, 2024), his Middle Eastern scholarly networks (Nurhasanah, 2017), his textualist methodology in hadith-based legal reasoning (Mashudi, 2021), and his defense of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah orthodoxy (Noupal, 2014; Suniah, 2015). Meanwhile, recent studies on urban and digital Sufism rarely trace their intellectual roots to nineteenth-century critiques of tarekat practices.

This article addresses this gap by examining the intellectual linkage between Sayyid Usman bin Yahya's nineteenth-century critique of tarekat practices and the development of contemporary Sufism in Jakarta. By integrating classical sources to reconstruct the original epistemological framework of his thought with recent studies on urban and digital religiosity, this research offers a genealogical analysis of continuity and transformation within Nusantara Sufism. Such an approach contributes to contemporary Islamic studies by demonstrating how classical critiques continue to inform modern expressions of Sufi spirituality, religious authority, and orthodoxy in urban Muslim societies.

METHOD

This study employs a literature research method (library research), focusing on Sayyid Usman bin Yahya's critique of tarekat practices and its influence on the patterns of contemporary Islamic studies in Jakarta. This approach is chosen to examine the main concepts of Sayyid Usman's thought and to analyze their relevance to the phenomena of urban Sufism, Neo-Sufism, and digital Sufism in urban Muslim societies (Howell, 2000; Rozi et al., 2024). This literature-based analysis is guided by the theoretical frameworks of Neo-Sufism, religious authority, and urban-digital religion to ensure coherence between data selection, content analysis, and contextual interpretation.

The data sources of this research consist of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include the works of Sayyid Usman bin Yahya, such as *al-Nasīhat al-ʿAnīqah li al-Mutalabbisīn bi al-Ṭarīqah* (Good Advice to Those Who Enter the Tariqah), *al-Wathīqat al-Wāfiyyah fi ʿUluww Shaʿn Ṭarīqah al-Ṣūfiyyah* (The Belief That Conveys All That Is Haq in the Height of Tariqah Sufiyyah), and *This is a Small Book to Find Out the Meaning of Tariqah in Short*. Secondary sources consist of books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and research reports related to the development of urban Sufism, Neo-Sufism, and contemporary religious practices in Indonesia (Fathuddin et al., 2023).

Data analysis is conducted through content analysis, which involves systematic reading, classification, and interpretation of the collected literature

in accordance with the research focus. The content analysis is carried out in three main stages. First, the study identifies the central themes in Sayyid Usman's critique of tarekat practices, which include criticism of excessive ritualism and deviant tarekat practices, the emphasis on sharia-oriented Sufism and normative religious discipline, the construction of religious authority and the legitimacy of Sufi leadership, the rationalization and reform of Sufi practices; and the continuity of transformation of Sufism in urban and digital contexts.

Second, these themes are classified by grouping Sayyid Usman's arguments based on their theological, legal, and ethical orientations, as well as their relevance to the theoretical frameworks of Neo-Sufism, religious authority, and urban-digital religion. Third, a contextual interpretation is undertaken to trace the relevance of Sayyid Usman's critique to contemporary paradigms of Sufism, particularly within urban and digitally mediated religious contexts.

Through this analytical process, the study examines the continuity and transformation of Sayyid Usman bin Yahya's thought within the broader landscape of Sufism studies in Jakarta. By integrating explicit thematic identification, systematic classification, and theoretically guided contextual interpretation, this methodological approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how Sayyid Usman's critique continues to shape contemporary patterns of Neo-Sufism and Islamic studies in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sayyid Usman's Criticism of the Practice of Tarekat

This subsection presents the main results of the study regarding Sayyid Usman bin Yahya's critique of tarekat practices in nineteenth-century Batavia. The analysis indicates that his criticism was not directed at Sufism as a spiritual path, but rather at the epistemological, theological, and sociological deviations that emerged in local tarekat practices, which lacked strong textual and sharia-based foundations.

The study demonstrates that the development of the tariqat in the nineteenth-century archipelago experienced significant expansion, particularly in Batavia and its surrounding areas. Major tariqats such as Naqshbandiyah, Khalidiyah, and Qadiriyyah Tariqat flourished by forming centers of instruction known as *tarekat pockets* (Azra, 2013). However, this development has given rise to new phenomena in the religious practices of the community, such as the worship of the teachers of the tarekat, excessive pilgrimage to the grave, bid'ah in family life, and the implementation of salvation rituals that are often seen as outside the confines of monotheism (Triwahyuni, 2023). The study suggests that these practices form the primary socio-religious context, prompting Sayyid

Usman bin Yahya, an authoritative Betawi scholar of his time, to feel the need to criticize the growing practice of the tarekat (Ahmad Fadli H. S., 2011; Noupal, 2013; Suniah, 2015).

In Content analysis *al-Nasiḥat al-'Anīqah li al-Mutalabbisīn bi al-Ṭarīqah* (*Good Advice to Those Who Enter Tariqah*) reveals that Sayyid Uthman's critique focused on tarekat practices that were detached from religious knowledge and normative Islamic sciences. He explicitly states:

فمن أراد الدخول في الطريق فعليه أولاً أن يتعلم علم التوحيد والفقہ ومعرفة أحوال القلب، وإلا وقع في الضلال والبدعة

"Whoever wants to enter the tarekat must first study the science of monotheism, fiqh, and know the state of the heart; otherwise, he will fall into error and heresy." (Uthman bin Yahya, 1886).

Thus, Sayyid Uthman rejects the rituals of the tariqat that do not have clear normative legitimacy, such as collective dhikr without a strong sanad, mystical baiat, and claims of spiritual authority that have the potential to divide the ummah (Azra, 1995; Laffan, 2011). Thus, the author argues that this quotation reflects Sayyid Uthman's epistemological criticism of the local practice of Sufism, which tends to emphasize the charisma of the murshid and spiritual experience rather than the theological and Sharia basis.

In addition to the epistemological aspect, Sayyid Uthman also highlighted the abuse of spiritual authority by some mursyids. In his book, *this is Boekoe Ketjil to Find Out the Meaning of Tarekat in a Short Speech*.

"كثير من شيوخ الطرق يطلبون الكرامة والشهرة لا وجه الله، وهم أبعد الناس عن الصدق والتقوى"

"Many teachers of the tarekat pursue friendship and popularity, not seek the pleasure of Allah; they are the ones who are furthest from honesty and piety (Uthman bin Yahya, 1891)."

The author's perspective, Sayyid Usman's criticism, was born out of socio-religious anxiety about the commercialization of religion and the practice of spiritual manipulation in Batavia. This phenomenon shows the tension between the ideals of Sufism and the practical reality of local Sufism. This condition became the main basis for the birth of Sayyid Usman's critical thinking on the development of the tarekat in the 19th century.

Sayyid Usman bin Yahya's criticism is both Theological and Sociological. Theologically, he rejects practices that are considered heresy and superstition because they are considered deviant from the principles of monotheism. Sociologically, he sees the rise of the practice of tarekat as a threat to the Social Cohesion of Muslims, because the emergence of exclusive communities often triggers conflicts between pilgrims (Laffan, 2011). Through this criticism, Sayyid Usman emphasized the need for the Rationalization of Sufi practice to be in harmony with pure monotheism and limit the authority of the mursyid so as not to go beyond the Shari'a.

However, the theological and sociological criticisms made by Sayyid Usman cannot be separated from the socio-political context of colonial Batavia, where the dynamics of the tariqat often intersect with efforts to resist Western hegemony. In such situations, the tariqat becomes a space of symbolic resistance to Western domination. However, the erroneous practice of rituals has the potential to weaken the social solidarity of Muslims (Suniah, 2015). The author sees that Sayyid Uthman sought to build the collective consciousness of the Muslim community to strengthen a knowledge-based religious identity, not just a ritual practice. This view is important because it shows the role of ulama as agents of social change in the face of the penetration of colonialism.

Based on the above description, Sayyid Usman's criticism of the tariqat is not a form of rejection of Sufism, but an attempt to reconstruct the epistemology and morality of Sufism (Suniah, 2015). His views on the integration of sharia and Sufism, social criticism of mursyid, and his involvement in the network of Nusantara scholars placed him as a central figure in the process of transforming Sufism into neo-Sufism. In the context of contemporary science, his ideas provide an analytical framework to understand the dynamics of urban Islam and cultural resistance under colonialism. Thus, Sayyid Usman can be seen as a pioneer of the renewal of Islamic thought in the archipelago that went beyond his time.

The Influence of Sayyid Usman's Criticism on Contemporary Sufistic Patterns

Building on the historical analysis presented in the previous subsection, this section examines the influence of Sayyid Usman bin Yahya's nineteenth-century criticism of tarekat practices on contemporary Sufistic patterns in Indonesia, particularly within urban and modern contexts.

This study finds that Sayyid Usman's critique contributed significantly to the emergence of a rational, sharia-oriented, and text-centered orientation in contemporary Sufism. His insistence that Sufi practices must be grounded in the Qur'an and hadith, and along with his rejection of tarekat rituals lacking normative legitimacy, such as collective dhikr without an authoritative sanad, mystical bai'at, and unchecked claims of spiritual authority, marked a shift from murshid-centered Sufism toward a nash-based epistemological framework (Usman bin Yahya, 1890). This shift emphasizes personal spiritual discipline, critical religious reasoning, and the limitation of spiritual authority within the boundaries of sharia.

The findings further demonstrate that contemporary Islamic thought in Indonesia increasingly integrates Sufi traditions with the demands of modern life. This integration has generated diverse religious approaches, including Neo-modernism, Post-Traditionalism, and Islamic Cultural movements, which reflect an effort to reconcile spirituality, rationality, and social adaptability

(Azra, 2013). In this context, Sayyid Uthman bin Yahya (1822–1914) held an important position as a scholar who was critical of the practice of the tarekat in the 19th century. Through the number of his treatises, he emphasized that Sufism should not be separated from the framework of sharia and must be based on the Qur'an and hadith (Usman bin Yahya, 1886). His criticism of tarekat practices that lacked normative legitimacy, including collective dhikr without an authoritative sanad, mystical bai'at, and unchecked claims of spiritual authority, paved the way for a shift from murshid-centered Sufism to a nash-based, text-centered orientation. Within this context, Sayyid Usman's thought occupies an important position as an early intellectual foundation for the rationalization and textualization of Sufi practices in modern Muslim societies.

These findings are consistent with earlier studies on the transformation of Sufism in Indonesia. Howell (2000) noted that neo-Sufism prioritizes personal spiritual deepening and sharia compliance, contrasting with traditional tarekat, which emphasizes collective rituals and murshid authority. In his research, the Sufism model that prioritizes personal spiritual deepening and obedience to the Shari'a, is different from the traditional tarekat that emphasizes collective rituals and the hierarchy of the mursyid. Fealy et al., (2008) similarly, highlight the transfer of religious authority from murshid figures to textual sources, enabling urban Muslims to critically select Sufi practices.

More recent studies further reinforce this trend. Fathuddin et al., (2023) shows that the contemporary Muslim generation is increasingly rejecting the practice of bid'ah, superstition, and blind taklid, while at the same time demanding a normative justification for every spiritual practice. Ridwan et al; (2024) document the emergence of urban Sufi communities in Jakarta that integrate spirituality with metropolitan life, placing the Qur'an and hadith as primary authorities, reflecting Sayyid Uthman's critique of deviant Sufi rituals. Collectively, these studies show that modern urban Sufism has shifted epistemologically from traditional murshid-based authority to rational, textual, and adaptive paradigms.

Based on the findings, the influence of Sayyid Usman's criticism on contemporary urban Sufism can be understood through three interconnected paradigms. First, the rational paradigm emphasizes the rejection of Sufi practices that lack a clear textual basis and affirms the necessity of normative legitimacy in religious life (Fathuddin et al., 2023). Second, the textual paradigm places the Qur'an and hadith as the primary sources of authority in guiding Sufi practice, limiting the scope of murshid authority within the framework of sharia (Ridwan et al., 2024; Uthman ibn Yahya, 1890). Third, the adaptive paradigm, namely the ability of modern Sufism to adapt its practice to the demands of

urbanization and globalization without abandoning the purity of Islamic teachings (Rozi et al., 2024).

In conclusion, Sayyid Usman bin Yahya can be regarded as a pioneer in the epistemological transformation of Sufism in the Indonesian archipelago. His critique laid the intellectual groundwork for the development of rational, textual, and adaptive forms of urban Sufism, demonstrating the enduring relevance of his thought in shaping contemporary Islamic spirituality within modern and urban contexts.

Reinterpretation of Sayyid Usman's Criticism in the Context of Urban Islam in Jakarta

Building on the discussion of Sayyid Usman's influence on contemporary Sufistic patterns, this section analyzes how his criticism is reinterpreted and actualized within the specific context of urban Islam in Jakarta, where urbanization, modernization, and digitalization significantly shape Muslim religiosity.

This study finds that urban Muslim communities in Jakarta increasingly adopt a rational, personal, and text-based form of Sufism. This form of Sufism emphasizes reflective spirituality, individual moral discipline, and textual authority, while consciously avoiding practices that lack clear normative legitimacy. In this context, Sayyid Usman's criticism of excessive rituals, the veneration of spiritual teachers, and deviations from sharia functions as a normative framework guiding contemporary reinterpretations of Sufi practice (Fathuddin et al., 2023; Rozi et al., 2024).

These findings resonate with earlier studies on urban Sufism. Howell (2000) observes that contemporary urban Sufism prioritizes personal spiritual experience and textual authority rather than hierarchical murshid-centered structures. This phenomenon is in line with the criticism of Sayyid Usman, who rejected the cult of the individual against spiritual teachers and emphasized the need to strengthen the Sharia base. Furthermore, Rozi et al. (2024) demonstrate that the concept of Islamic culture enables Sufi practices to accommodate local and urban cultural values while maintaining the normative integrity of Islamic teachings, making Sufism more contextual within Jakarta's metropolitan society.

The study also finds that this reinterpretation is reinforced by the broader pattern of urban religiosity, in which religious practices are adapted to the rhythm and pressures of metropolitan life. Urban Muslim society now tends to interpret Sufism as a means of inner reflection and the search for meaning in life amid the pressures of modernity, industrialization, and globalization (Ulya, 2019). A text-based and context-sensitive Sufi approach enables Sufism to remain flexible and responsive to the spiritual needs of urban communities. Within this framework, Sayyid Usman's criticism finds its actualization not only

as a normative reference but also as methodological inspiration for developing an inclusive, humanistic, and adaptive form of Sufism.

The development of digital technology further expands this transformation. This study finds that digital religiosity has reshaped urban Sufism into a more fluid and participatory form. Sufi practices are increasingly conducted through online platforms such as virtual dhikr assemblies, Zoom-based Sufi studies, and spiritual YouTube channels (Kamalludin et al., 2025; Rosfiyanti et al., 2024). Digitalization provides more egalitarian access to spiritual learning and reconstructs previously hierarchical patterns of religious authority into more participatory and dialogical forms (Gazali & Efendi, 2023)

The implications of this reinterpretation extend beyond ritual practice to Islamic education and dakwah in Jakarta. The text-based and reflective approach to Sufism can be applied as an educational model that encourages the internalization of Sufi values such as simplicity, sincerity, and social responsibility, through direct engagement with the Qur'an and hadith (Gazali & Efendi, 2023). In this sense, Sayyid Usman's thought contributes to strengthening an urban Islamic narrative that is textual, rational, and adaptive.

In conclusion, Sayyid Usman's criticism demonstrates strong and sustained relevance to the landscape of urban Islam in Jakarta. Contemporary Sufism increasingly evolves toward being more rational, through the rejection of practices without normative legitimacy; more textual, by placing the Qur'an and hadith as primary authorities; and more adaptive, through its responsiveness to the challenges of modernity and digitalization (Fathuddin et al., 2023). Thus, Sayyid Uthman's thought became not only a historical legacy, but also an epistemological foundation in building a contextual and inclusive model of modern urban Sufism.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine Sayyid Usman bin Yahya's criticism of tarekat practices in nineteenth-century Batavia and to analyze its relevance and influence on the development of contemporary urban Sufism in Jakarta.

This research confirms that Sayyid Usman bin Yahya's criticism of tarekat practices not only had a significant impact within the historical context of nineteenth-century Batavia, but also provided a strong epistemological foundation for the development of sharia-based urban neo-Sufism in contemporary Jakarta. The findings demonstrate that Sayyid Usman's ideas remain relevant to contemporary Islamic studies, particularly in addressing the diversity of urban Muslim religiosity, which is increasingly rational, textual, and adaptive to modernity without neglecting the spiritual dimension.

In contrast to previous studies that tend to emphasize historical aspects alone, this study contributes a new perspective by demonstrating how Sayyid Usman's

criticism functions as a conceptual foundation in the formation of modern Islamic studies, including the contexts of digital religiosity and contextual urban Sufism in Jakarta. In this sense, the research reinforces Sayyid Usman's thought as an integral part of the transformation of Sufism toward a more inclusive and Sharia-oriented framework.

Theoretically, this study enriches the discourse on the transition of Sufism from traditional tarekat-based models to a form of neo-Sufism that is more responsive to the social dynamics of urban society. Practically, the findings may inform the development of Islamic education curricula, digital da'wah strategies, and contextual approaches to Sufism that address the challenges of globalization.

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