

ACEHNESE SUFISM: THE TRANSFORMATION OF ISLAMIC SPIRITUALITY AND SOCIAL IDENTITY FROM THE CLASSICAL TO THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

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Abstract

This study examines the transformation of Acehnese Sufism as an expression of Islamic spirituality and a foundation of social identity from the classical to the contemporary era. Aceh, known as the Veranda of Mecca, possesses a distinctive and deeply rooted Sufi tradition within the history of Islam in the Malay Archipelago. The research aims to explore how Sufi teachings and practices in Aceh have evolved, adapted, and contributed to shaping the region's socio-political and cultural dynamics. Employing a historical-phenomenological approach, this study investigates the works of classical Sufi figures such as Hamzah Fansuri, Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani, and Abd al-Ra'uf al-Sinkili, as well as the changing role of Sufism during the colonial, post-independence, and digital eras. The findings reveal that Acehnese Sufism has transformed from contemplative spirituality into an engaged spirituality (*sufisme engagé*), actively participating in political resistance, post-conflict reconstruction, and digital religious movements. This revitalization demonstrates that Acehnese Sufism serves not only as a religious heritage but also as a dynamic source of moral and social identity amid the challenges of modernity. The study contributes to the broader discourse on Islam Nusantara by offering new insights into the integration of spiritual and social dimensions in the development of Islam in Aceh.

Keywords: *Acehnese Sufism, Islamic Spirituality, Social Identity.*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini membahas transformasi tasawuf Aceh sebagai ekspresi spiritualitas Islam dan pembentuk identitas sosial masyarakat dari era klasik hingga kontemporer. Aceh, yang dikenal sebagai Serambi Mekkah, memiliki tradisi sufistik yang khas dan berakar kuat dalam sejarah Islam Nusantara. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana ajaran dan praktik tasawuf di Aceh berkembang, beradaptasi, serta berperan dalam membentuk dinamika sosial, politik, dan budaya masyarakat setempat. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan historis-fenomenologis, penelitian ini menelusuri karya-karya tokoh sufi klasik seperti Hamzah Fansuri, Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani, dan Abd al-Ra'uf al-Sinkili, serta menelaah perubahan peran tasawuf pada masa kolonial, kemerdekaan, hingga era digital. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tasawuf Aceh mengalami transformasi dari spiritualitas kontemplatif menuju spiritualitas sosial (*sufisme engagé*) yang aktif dalam perjuangan politik, rekonstruksi pasca-konflik, dan dakwah digital kontemporer. Revitalisasi ini memperlihatkan bahwa tasawuf Aceh tidak hanya menjadi warisan religius, tetapi juga sumber pembentukan identitas sosial dan moral yang kontekstual di tengah tantangan modernitas. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pengayaan kajian Islam Nusantara melalui pemahaman baru tentang integrasi antara dimensi spiritual dan sosial dalam perkembangan Islam di Aceh.

Kata Kunci: *Tasawuf Aceh, Spiritualitas Islam, Identitas sosial.*

A. Introduction

Aceh, long known as the *Verandah of Mecca* (Presilawati et al., 2022), holds a special position in the history of Islam in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. This region was not only the gateway through which Islam entered the archipelago but also a center for the development of a strong intellectual and spiritual tradition. One of Aceh's most prominent intellectual legacies is the tradition of *tasawuf* (Sufism), which has become an integral part of the region's religious, social, and cultural life (Asmanidar et al., 2024). Since the 16th century, Acehnese Sufism has flourished through the works and teachings of great Sufi scholars such as Hamzah Fansuri, Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani, and Abd al-Ra'uf al-Sinkili. Through their teachings, *tasawuf* evolved not only as an individual spiritual practice but also as a collective worldview that shaped the moral values and social order of Acehnese society (Sasmanda, 2018).

Sufism in Aceh displays a unique character due to its dialogical nature, bridging the universal principles of Islamic teachings with the particularities of local culture. In a historical context, Acehnese Sufism cannot be separated from the process of Islamization that took place amid the social and political dynamics of the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate. During that period, *tasawuf* became the foundation for the formation of a distinctive Islamic concept an Islam that is both spiritual and rational, rooted in inner contemplation yet deeply engaged with social and political realities. Through classical Malay-language Sufi writings, Acehnese scholars succeeded in spreading a humanistic and cosmopolitan understanding of Islam, making Aceh a pivotal center in the network of Islamic scholars across Southeast Asia.

However, the journey of Acehnese Sufism was not without challenges. History records several phases of transformation and theological tension, such as the *wahdat al-wujud* controversy in the 17th century involving major figures like Hamzah Fansuri, Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani, and Nuruddin al-Raniry (AR, 2023). The debate between Sharia orthodoxy and Sufi esotericism affected not only religious aspects but also the structures of power and intellectual authority in the Aceh Sultanate. Nevertheless, these conflicts enriched the intellectual dynamics of Islamic thought in Aceh, giving rise to a more moderate and contextual form of Sufism, as reflected in the teachings of Abd al-Ra'uf al-Sinkili, who sought to harmonize the dimensions of *sharia* and *haqiqa*.

Entering the colonial and post-independence periods, Acehnese Sufism underwent a significant transformation in its function. From a contemplative spirituality, it evolved into a social and political force that played a vital role in the resistance against colonialism. Sufi masters and *tarekat* leaders such as Teungku Chik di Tiro combined the spirit of spiritual *jihād* with physical struggle against the colonizers. In this context, *tasawuf* was understood not merely as a path toward closeness with God but also as a moral energy that inspired society to pursue justice and freedom. This tradition gave birth

to a new form of spirituality in Aceh one that is actively engaged in social and political life, often referred to as *engaged Sufism* (Hamdi, 2017).

In the contemporary era, particularly after the implementation of Islamic law and the end of the armed conflict in Aceh, Sufism has once again found its relevance. Amid modernization, globalization, and the rise of digital culture, *tasawuf* emerges as a source of meaning and spiritual balance for a society experiencing moral disorientation. Many Islamic educational institutions, *pesantren*, and *tarekat* in Aceh have now integrated Sufi teachings into modern educational systems, even utilizing social media to disseminate the values of peaceful, inclusive, and adaptive Islamic spirituality (Nurlaila, 2022). This phenomenon demonstrates that Acehnese Sufism is not merely a historical legacy but a living tradition that continues to transform in response to the challenges of the times.

Moreover, the social dimension of Acehnese Sufism is evident in its role in shaping the collective identity of society. Values such as humility, solidarity, sincerity, and simplicity have become the social ethos that guides the daily behavior of the Acehnese people. In the context of post-conflict reconstruction, Sufi teachings have played a vital role as a source of reconciliation and collective healing. Spiritual values emphasizing love, patience, and trust in God have become cultural strengths that help society rebuild a harmonious social life (Muhammad, 2020).

Based on this background, this study seeks to comprehensively examine the transformation of Acehnese Sufism from the classical to the contemporary era, focusing on its role in shaping Islamic spirituality and the social identity of the Acehnese people. Using a historical-phenomenological approach, this study not only traces the evolution of Sufism's forms and meanings throughout history but also seeks to understand how this tradition continues to adapt to the challenges of modernity, globalization, and the digital age. Thus, this research aims to contribute to the development of *Islam Nusantara* studies, particularly in understanding the integration between the spiritual and social dimensions that characterize Islam in Aceh.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a historical-phenomenological method to trace the transformation of Acehnese Sufism from the classical to the contemporary era (Sugiyono, 2019). This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to understand the development of Sufism not merely as a sequence of historical events but also as a living spiritual and social experience within society. Through the historical approach, this research seeks to reconstruct the long journey of the Sufi tradition in Aceh, while the phenomenological approach (Mahmudin, 2021) is used to interpret the meanings and values embedded in the practices and spiritual expressions of the Acehnese people across different periods of time.

Within the historical framework, this study traces primary sources that represent the teachings and development of Acehnese Sufism since the 16th century. These sources include classical manuscripts such as *Asrar al-'Arifin* by Hamzah Fansuri, *Mir'at al-*

Mu'minin by Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani, and *Tarjuman al-Mustafid* by Abd al-Ra'uf al-Sinkili, as well as historical documents of the Aceh Sultanate, colonial records, and the works of contemporary scholars. Meanwhile, the phenomenological approach is applied to understand how these teachings have been experienced and adapted by Acehnese society in their religious and social life. Thus, this research does not merely portray Sufism as a theological concept but as a *living tradition* that continuously transforms in response to the dynamics of time.

The data for this study were obtained from two main sources: primary and secondary data. Primary data consist of classical texts, manuscripts, and religious documents containing Sufi teachings and practices in Aceh, as well as observations of ongoing religious activities such as *ratéb*, collective *zikir*, and *tarekat* study gatherings. Secondary data include scholarly literature such as books, journal articles, theses, dissertations, and research reports relevant to the history and development of Sufism in the Malay-Indonesian world. All data were collected through an in-depth literature study and, where relevant, complemented with semi-structured interviews with Sufi figures or *tarekat* practitioners to enrich contextual understanding.

The data analysis process was conducted using a descriptive-interpretative approach (Pisa Aulia et al., 2023), interpreting each finding within the historical and social context of Acehnese society. Historical analysis was used to map the phases of Sufi development classical, modern, and contemporary while phenomenological analysis helped uncover the spiritual meanings embedded within these religious practices (Hadiat & Rinda Fauzian, 2021). The results of these analyses were then synthesized to reveal the pattern of Sufism's transformation from contemplative spirituality to social spirituality that actively contributes to the formation of communal identity. The validity of each interpretation was tested through source and method triangulation, by comparing various texts, field data, and perspectives of Sufi scholars. Through this method, the study aims to present a comprehensive portrayal of the journey of Acehnese Sufism as both a spiritual and social phenomenon. The historical-phenomenological approach enables the researcher not only to understand how Sufi teachings have been transmitted from generation to generation but also how Sufi values have been internalized within the modern life of Acehnese society

C. Results and Discussion

1. The Journey of Acehnese Sufism from the Classical to the Contemporary Period

Acehnese Sufism represents one of the most influential intellectual and spiritual legacies in the history of Islam in the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago. Its development reflects the long-standing dynamic interaction between the spiritual dimension of Islam and the formation of the social identity of Acehnese society. From the classical period to the contemporary era, Sufism has served not only as an individual spiritual path but also as a cultural, moral, and social force that has shaped the face of Acehnese civilization. The roots of Sufism in Aceh can be traced back to the process of Islamization of the

Archipelago in the 13th century. However, its most significant development occurred between the 16th and 18th centuries, when the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate reached its golden age as a center of Islamic scholarship and power in Southeast Asia. During this period, prominent Sufi figures emerged who were not only scholars and poets but also architects of the Islamic identity of Acehnese society (Shadiqin, 2018).

One of the central figures was Hamzah Fansuri (w. 1590), a visionary Sufi and poet who introduced the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of being), influenced by the thought of Ibn 'Arabi. Through his works such as *Asrar al-'Arifin* and *Sharab al-'Ashiqin*, Hamzah succeeded in integrating Sufi teachings into the local language and culture. His poems served as an effective medium of *da'wah*, making Sufism not only a spiritual discipline but also a tool for moral and social education. His ideas were later developed by Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani (w. 1630), who systematized Sufi thought through his works *Mir'at al-Mu'minin* and *Jawhar al-Haqaiq*. Through his role at the royal court, al-Sumatrani helped affirm Sufism as an integral part of the intellectual and political life of the Aceh Sultanate.

However, this dynamic later faced a major test in the 17th century with the emergence of the *Wujuddiyyah* controversy a theological debate between followers of Hamzah Fansuri and Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani and the orthodox scholars led by Nuruddin al-Raniri (w. 1658) (Sudrajat, 2019). In his work *Hujjat al-Siddiq li Daf' al-Zindiq*, al-Raniri strongly condemned the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud*, which he considered misleading and contrary to the principles of *tawhid*. This controversy was not only theological but also political, as it involved the religious legitimacy of the Aceh Sultanate. Many earlier Sufi works were burned, and their teachings were officially banned. Nevertheless, the Sufi tradition did not disappear; it continued to live within the spiritual spaces of the community, transmitted through *tarekat* orders and oral traditions that emphasized balance between the inner and outer dimensions, between *haqiqa* and *sharia*.

After this controversy, a phase of synthesis and consolidation emerged, marked by the appearance of 'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Sinkili (w. 1693), a moderate scholar and Sufi who played a major role in redefining the relationship between Sufism and Islamic orthodoxy (Rosyadi, 2020). As a student of Ahmad al-Qushashi in Mecca, al-Sinkili brought a more harmonious and contextual approach to Sufism. Through his monumental work *Tarjuman al-Mustafid*, a Malay-language Qur'anic exegesis (Putra, 2014), as well as his Sufi treatises such as *Hidayat al-Habib fi al-Targhib wa al-Tarhib* and *Daqa'iq al-Huruf*, he emphasized that true Sufism does not reject *sharia* but deepens its meaning. Al-Sinkili's moderate approach successfully eased theological tensions and restored Sufism's role as a legitimate and productive source of spirituality in Acehnese society.

The intellectual and spiritual legacies of these classical Sufi figures continued to evolve into the contemporary era. Today, Acehnese Sufism is understood not merely as an individual spiritual practice but also as a social paradigm that emphasizes the balance between personal piety and collective responsibility. In a modern context marked by

globalization, materialism, and moral crisis, Sufism offers transcendental values such as simplicity, sincerity, and social solidarity. These values have become an essential part of the identity of the Acehnese people, who are deeply religious and oriented toward social justice. Thus, the journey of Acehnese Sufism from the classical to the contemporary era reflects the transformation of Islamic spirituality into a distinctive social identity (Rohmaniyah, 2013). Sufism is not merely a mystical dimension of Islam but also a cultural and moral force that preserves the continuity of Islamic values within Acehnese society amid the challenges of changing times.

2. Acehnese Sufism in the Modern Era: Spirituality, Resistance, and Social Solidarity

Entering the 19th century, Acehnese Sufism faced new challenges with the intensification of Dutch colonial power in the Aceh region. The Aceh War (1873–1914) was not merely a political and military conflict but also an ideological struggle between Aceh's traditional Islamic spirituality and the secular modernity brought by Western colonialism (Asmanidar & Fazal, 2022). In this context, Acehnese Sufism underwent a transformation in meaning and function from contemplative spirituality to resistant and transformative spirituality. The Sufi masters and *tarekat* scholars no longer served solely as spiritual guides but also as moral and political leaders in the resistance against colonialism. The Sufi teachings that had previously emphasized *fana'* (the annihilation of the ego) and *jihad an-nafs* (the struggle against one's desires) were reinterpreted as a collective spirit of struggle against oppression. Thus, Sufism became the ethical foundation and spiritual resilience of the Acehnese people's resistance movement.

One of the most prominent figures of this period was Teungku Chik di Tiro Muhammad Saman (1836–1891). He was a Sufi and a warrior who received his religious education in Mecca before returning to Aceh to lead the resistance against the Dutch (Nurlaila, 2022). His understanding of Sufism, particularly the notion of total surrender to God (*fana'*), was translated into heroic action where fighting against colonialism was regarded as the highest form of worship. In the person of Chik di Tiro, spiritual values and nationalism converged, making Sufism the moral foundation of the Acehnese resistance movement. Beyond its ideological strength, Acehnese Sufism in the modern era also served as a social network that strengthened communal solidarity. This was evident in the growth of various Sufi orders such as the Naqshbandiyyah, Qadiriyyah, and Khalwatiyyah (Fauzi, 2023). These *tarekat* not only functioned as institutions of spiritual education but also as effective frameworks for social organization in the face of colonial oppression.

The Naqshbandiyyah Order, which entered Aceh through connections among scholars and pilgrims returning from Mecca, emphasized the concept of *rabithah* (the spiritual bond between disciple and master) and spiritual training through *lataif* (the purification of subtle centers of consciousness within the self). This practice not only deepened individual spiritual experience but also strengthened social cohesion and

collective discipline among its followers. Meanwhile, the Qadiriyyah Order, with its tradition of *dhikr jahr* (loud and communal remembrance of God), reinforced the communal and expressive dimensions of Acehnese spirituality. This practice was often integrated with local customs and traditions, resulting in a creative synthesis between universal Islamic values and Acehnese cultural wisdom. The Khalwatiyyah Order, although less influential than the other two, also contributed to the cultivation of inner spirituality and tranquility amid the pressures of colonial domination (Fauzi, 2023).

In this modern period, Acehnese Sufism was no longer merely a domain for spiritual seclusion but transformed into an active and dynamic socio-spiritual movement. The spirituality within Acehnese Sufism manifested in forms of resistance against injustice, social solidarity, and the preservation of Islamic identity amid the dominance of Western colonialism. This transformation illustrates how Sufism was able to adapt to changing times without losing its spiritual essence, making Aceh a living example of the synchronization between Sufism, struggle, and the local Islamic culture of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago.

3. Acehnese Sufism in the Contemporary Era: The Reconstruction of Spirituality and Social Identity

Entering the 20th and 21st centuries, Acehnese Sufism underwent a complex phase of transformation in line with the social, political, and cultural changes experienced by Acehnese society. After centuries of serving as the spiritual and moral foundation of communal life, Sufism began adapting to the dynamics of independence, modernization, socio-political conflict, globalization, and the implementation of Islamic law at the regional level.

a. The Era of Independence and the Reconstruction of Spirituality

Following Indonesia's independence, Acehnese Sufism entered a period of reconstruction and revitalization. After enduring repression during the colonial era, Sufi traditions regained space for development. Religious scholars and spiritual leaders sought to restore the Sufi values that had long been the core of Aceh's Islamic identity, while also adjusting them to the demands of nation-building. One of the central figures during this period was Teungku H. Muhammad Daud Beureueh (1906–1987). In addition to being known as a political leader and a figure of resistance, he was also a Sufi with deep spiritual insight. Beureueh's thought reflected the distinctive character of contemporary Acehnese Sufism as an integration between spiritual and socio-political dimensions. For Beureueh, the struggle against one's desires (*jihad al-nafs*) could not be separated from the broader struggle for social justice and the implementation of Islamic law. This perspective illustrates the efforts of Acehnese Sufis to make Sufism a moral force in building a postcolonial social order.

b. Modernization and the Challenges of Globalization

The New Order period (1966–1998) marked the advent of modernization and secularization, which posed challenges to the continuity of spiritual traditions in Aceh.

The modernization process, oriented toward technocratic rationality, often conflicted with the Sufi worldview that emphasized inner experience and mystical consciousness. Nevertheless, Acehnese Sufism demonstrated a dynamic capacity for adaptation. Religious scholars and Sufis began to utilize modern media radio, television, and later the internet as platforms for *dakwah* and the transmission of Sufi teachings. The oral tradition that had once been limited to direct teacher-disciple relationships evolved into books, recorded lectures, and digital content. One of the key figures in this transformation was Tgk. H. Hasanoel Bashry (1920–2009), founder of the Darul Ihsan Islamic Boarding School. He integrated Sufi education into the modern schooling system, making his *pesantren* a model that combined classical Islamic scholarship with modern educational innovation. These efforts signaled a shift in Acehnese Sufism from an exclusive spiritual practice to an intellectual and cultural movement relevant to modern life.

c. Conflict and Spiritual Resilience

The prolonged conflict in Aceh (1976–2005) between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) (Muis et al., 2021) and the Indonesian government became a severe test for the existence of Sufism. The violence and social tensions produced not only physical devastation but also deep spiritual and psychological crises among the population. In such conditions, Sufism once again revealed its role as a source of spiritual resilience and social cohesion. Sufi masters and *tarekat* scholars acted as mediators of peace, healers of spiritual wounds, and moral guardians of society. Sufi practices such as collective *dhikr*, communal prayers, and spiritual healing rituals served as means of collective trauma recovery (Tumanggor & Dariyo, 2021). The 2004 tsunami further reinforced the position of Sufism in Acehnese life. The catastrophe was widely interpreted as a spiritual test and a divine call to return to God. In the post-tsunami reconstruction process, Sufi teachings functioned as a form of spiritual therapy that helped communities rediscover meaning, serenity, and renewed hope amid destruction.

d. The Implementation of Islamic Law and the Challenges of Spirituality

Since the implementation of Islamic law (*syariat Islam*) in Aceh in 2001, the Sufi tradition has gained a renewed space to contribute to the region's religious life. However, the formalization of Islamic law also generated a dialectic between the exoteric (*zahir*) and esoteric (*batin*) dimensions of Islam (Ikramatoun, 2017). The *tarekat* scholars have played a vital role in mediating this tension. They emphasize that the true implementation of Islamic law lies not only in adherence to formal legal codes but also in the purification of the heart and the perfection of character, as taught in Sufism. Thus, Sufism serves as a balancing force between legalism and spirituality, ensuring that the application of Islamic law in Aceh does not lose its humanistic depth and spiritual essence.

4. Characteristics and Uniqueness of Acehnese Sufism

Acehnese Sufism possesses distinct features and unique characteristics that differentiate it from Sufi traditions in other parts of the Islamic world. This uniqueness is reflected not only in its spiritual teachings but also in its remarkable adaptability to the

social, cultural, and political contexts of Acehese society throughout history. Broadly speaking, the characteristics of Acehese Sufism can be identified in three main dimensions: the synthesis of the local and the universal, socially engaged Sufism (*sufisme engagé*), and the significant role of women in the Sufi tradition.

a) Synthesis Between Locality and Universality

One of the most distinctive features of Acehese Sufism is its ability to synthesize the universal values of Islam with the local wisdom of Acehese society. Acehese Sufism does not merely imitate the practices and doctrines of Middle Eastern Sufism but rather adapts and contextualizes them within local traditions, language, and cultural expressions. This integration is clearly evident in classical literary works such as *syair* (poetic verses) and *hikayat* (didactic tales) written in the Acehese and Malay languages, making Sufism more accessible to the broader community. Oral literature and *hikayat* traditions became effective media for disseminating spiritual and moral teachings. Furthermore, ritual practices such as *ratéb* (collective *dhikr*) demonstrate local adaptation of *tarekat dhikr* traditions. *Ratéb* functions not only as an act of worship but also as a means of strengthening social solidarity and Islamic identity within Acehese society. In this way, Acehese Sufism maintains a balance between universal spirituality and local cultural context, rendering it unique among the Sufi traditions of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago (*Nusantara*).

b) *Sufisme Engagé*: Socially Engaged Spirituality

Contrary to the common perception of Sufism as a spiritual path detached from worldly affairs, Acehese Sufism is characterized by its active engagement with social and political realities. This tradition can be described as *sufisme engage* a form of Sufism that emphasizes social involvement as an integral expression of spiritual practice. From the colonial period to the modern era, Acehese Sufis have served not only as spiritual teachers but also as leaders of resistance and agents of social transformation. Their roles were particularly evident in the struggles against Dutch colonialism, the defense of independence, and post-conflict reconciliation efforts. For Acehese Sufis, participation in socio-political life is not a deviation from the spiritual path but a tangible realization of the *maqām* (station) of faith's perfection. True spirituality, in their view, is manifested through social responsibility, advocacy for justice, and the pursuit of humanitarian values. Thus, Acehese Sufism presents an integrative model of religiosity that unites contemplation with action, and the inward with the social.

c) The Feminine Dimension in Acehese Sufism

An aspect both rare and fascinating within Acehese Sufism is the active role of women in its spiritual traditions. While in many parts of the Islamic world Sufism has been dominated by male figures, in Aceh women have also held important positions in the spiritual sphere. One prominent example is Cut Nyak Dhien, who is celebrated not only as a national heroine but also as a deeply spiritual figure. In her struggle against colonial forces, she embodied a synthesis of spiritual steadfastness and political courage, demonstrating that Sufi dimensions can manifest through struggle and sacrifice in the

social realm. This tradition continues into the contemporary period, marked by the emergence of female scholars (*ulama*) and *mursyid* (spiritual guides) who play vital roles in teaching and advancing Sufism in Aceh. These women serve not only as spiritual mentors for fellow women but also as respected community leaders. This phenomenon illustrates that Acehnese Sufism is inclusive and provides space for spiritual expression across genders an element that enriches the religious and social identity of Acehnese society. Through these three defining characteristics, Acehnese Sufism reveals itself as a living, adaptive spiritual tradition deeply rooted in social reality. It fosters not only personal piety but also collective consciousness, solidarity, and a spirit of struggle that form an inseparable part of Aceh's social identity. Consequently, Acehnese Sufism can be understood as a distinctive model of Islamic spiritual transformation that harmoniously integrates faith, culture, and local history.

5. Acehnese Sufism in the Digital Era

Entering the 21st century, Acehnese Sufism embarks on a new chapter in its long historical journey. The advent of the digital era has brought profound changes to the ways in which people interact, learn, and cultivate spiritual awareness. Within this context, Sufism which for centuries developed through personal relationships between teacher (*mursyid*) and disciple (*murid*) is now adapting to a world characterized by rapid, open, and global communication. This transformation presents both opportunities and challenges for preserving the values of Islamic spirituality amidst the dynamic landscape of a modern society increasingly interconnected by technology.

Advancements in information technology and digital media have fundamentally reshaped the methods of transmitting and practicing Sufism in Aceh. Whereas in the classical period, the transmission of Sufi teachings relied heavily on intimate, face-to-face relationships between *murid* and *mursyid*, in the digital age this spiritual connection has expanded through various online platforms. Contemporary *tarekat* scholars and *da'i* in Aceh actively utilize social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and podcasts as tools for *dakwah* and spiritual guidance. Through these media, Sufi teachings such as *dhikr*, *wirid*, and contemplation have become more widely accessible to the public especially younger generations without being constrained by geographical distance or time limitations.

However, this digitalization of spirituality also introduces new challenges. Traditionally, Sufism is rooted in *tawajjuh* (inner connection) and *suhbah* (companionship with a teacher) two essential elements that require intimacy and depth of inner experience. In the mass, impersonal realm of digital space, these spiritual dimensions risk being reduced to mere consumption of information (Jajat Burhanudin and Kees van Dijk (eds.), 2013, pp. 234–256). Consequently, contemporary Acehnese Sufis strive to maintain a balance between the authenticity of spiritual experience and the effectiveness of digital technology. One notable form of adaptation is the emergence of online *dhikr* gatherings that preserve the etiquette (*adab*) and structure of traditional

Sufism while taking advantage of the accessibility afforded by modern technology. This transformation underscores that Acehese Sufism is neither rigid nor resistant to modernity; rather, it represents a flexible spiritual system capable of integrating Sufi values into new contexts without losing their profound essence.

Another remarkable phenomenon in the development of Acehese Sufism in the digital age is the growing interest of millennial and post-millennial generations in Sufi teachings (John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, 2001, pp. 167–189). Despite living amidst globalization, technological advancement, and materialistic culture, many young Acehese are increasingly seeking existential meaning and inner peace through Sufi practices. This trend demonstrates that modernity does not necessarily lead to secularization; instead, it can open new spaces for spiritual renewal. In a social environment marked by pressure and information overload, Sufi teachings such as *dhikr*, *muraqabah* (mindful awareness of the Divine), and *tazkiyah al-nafs* (purification of the soul) provide spiritual therapy that soothes and harmonizes modern life.

Interestingly, young Acehese Sufis have succeeded in bridging classical Sufi heritage with the language and symbols familiar to the digital generation. They relate concepts such as *fanā'* (self-annihilation), *mahabbah* (divine love), and *ma'rifah* (gnosis) to modern psychological terminology, emotional balance, and even the spiritual dimensions of neuroscience. Such approaches render Sufism more inclusive and communicative without diluting the substance of its teachings. In this context, Acehese Sufism emerges as a dynamic form of spirituality capable of dialoguing with contemporary developments while strengthening the religious and social identity of Acehese society amidst the powerful currents of globalization.

Thus, Acehese Sufism in the digital era demonstrates an extraordinary capacity for creative transformation without losing the essence of its teachings. It serves as a meeting point between tradition and modernity, between the transcendent values of Sufism and the pragmatic realities of digital life. Through this wise adaptation, Sufism functions not only as a spiritual doctrine but also as a social force that preserves the community's inner balance and enriches the Islamic heritage of Aceh. This living spirituality in the digital world enables Acehese Sufism to continue playing a vital role in shaping the religious and cultural identity of society both today and in the future.

6. Challenges and Future Prospects of Acehese Sufism

Entering the global era marked by the rapid flow of information and cross-cultural interactions, Acehese Sufism faces a series of new and complex challenges. On one hand, globalization opens up opportunities for the dissemination of Sufi teachings to wider segments of society and the expansion of spiritual networks across regions. On the other hand, this process also brings the risk of eroding local uniqueness and weakening the spiritual identity that has long been a distinctive feature of Acehese Sufism. These challenges demand intelligent strategies to ensure that Sufism can continue to adapt without losing its essence and original character.

a. Globalization and the Preservation of Identity

One of the main challenges for contemporary Acehese Sufism is maintaining a balance between openness to global influences and the preservation of local identity. Religious globalization tends to encourage the homogenization of Islamic practices and understandings, which may shift or dilute religious expressions that are deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts. In this situation, the Acehese Sufi tradition which, since the classical period, has exhibited a unique blend of universal Islamic values and local wisdom must preserve its distinctive character as a living spiritual heritage.

The ulama and mursyids of Aceh are required not only to act as guardians of tradition but also as spiritual innovators capable of reinterpreting Sufi teachings in accordance with contemporary dynamics. This preservation effort cannot be carried out through a closed attitude toward modernity, but rather through the development of creative forms of adaptation that allow Acehese Sufism to remain relevant amid rapid social changes. Thus, the process of preserving identity does not mean rejecting global currents; instead, it reaffirms local uniqueness as an integral part of the broader spiritual richness of Islam.

b. Institutionalization and Bureaucratization of Spirituality

Beyond the challenge of globalization, the growth of formal religious institutions in Aceh also presents its own dynamics for the Sufi world. Historically, Sufism in Aceh flourished in informal settings such as *dayah* (traditional Islamic boarding schools), *surau* (small mosques), or *majelis zikir* (communal remembrance gatherings) characterized by close personal relationships between teachers and disciples. In the contemporary era, however, Sufism has begun to enter a more institutionalized domain, integrated into the formal religious system.

This institutionalization process has two sides. On the one hand, it provides stability, legitimacy, and continuity for the Sufi tradition, particularly in the context of education and the preservation of spiritual values within modern society. On the other hand, excessive bureaucratization risks undermining the spontaneity and flexibility that are hallmarks of Sufi life. The central challenge for the leaders of Sufi orders and Acehese ulama today is to strike a balance between administrative requirements and spiritual essence, ensuring that Sufism remains a source of inner renewal rather than merely a formal religious structure.

c. Interreligious Dialogue and Spiritual Pluralism

Within Indonesia's pluralistic and democratic context, Acehese Sufism holds great potential to serve as a moral force in strengthening social harmony and interfaith dialogue. The teachings of Sufism which emphasize love, empathy, and the universal awareness of divine presence can act as vital bridges for fostering mutual understanding across religious boundaries. These Sufi values are inherently aligned with the spirit of pluralism and humanity that underpins Indonesia's national identity.

Several Acehese Sufi figures and communities have recently become active in interfaith dialogue forums at both local and national levels. This engagement is not merely

a form of religious diplomacy (Purwadi, 2023) but a reflection of the deep spiritual essence of Sufism itself namely, the awareness that every pursuit of truth represents an expression of divine compassion. Through these interreligious interactions, Acehese Sufism not only enriches the spiritual understanding of its adherents but also strengthens the image of Acehese Islam as open, tolerant, and deeply rooted in universal human values.

The challenges confronting Acehese Sufism in the future are, in essence, opportunities to reaffirm its identity as a dynamic spiritual tradition (Hudaeri, 2007). By harmoniously integrating classical heritage, modern adaptation, and inclusive social engagement, Acehese Sufism can continue to play a strategic role in shaping the religious and social identity of the Acehese people. In a global context marked by uncertainty, Sufism continues to offer profound meaning, inner balance, and spiritual tranquility universal human needs that transcend all times and places.

D. Conclusion

Acehese Sufism represents the dynamic and ever-living spirituality of Islam that has remained vibrant and adaptive throughout its history. From the classical period to the contemporary era, this Sufi tradition has not only endured various social, political, and cultural transformations but has also demonstrated an extraordinary ability to reinterpret spiritual values in response to the needs of its time. Throughout its historical trajectory, Acehese Sufism has consistently played a vital role as a moral foundation, a source of inner peace, and an instrument for shaping the social identity of the Acehese people.

The uniqueness of Acehese Sufism lies in its ability to harmoniously synthesize the universal values of Islam with the deep-rooted local wisdom of Acehese culture. This distinctive feature sets it apart from other Sufi traditions found elsewhere. Furthermore, the active involvement of Acehese Sufis in social and political spheres illustrates that spirituality is not perceived as a form of withdrawal from the world but as a moral energy dedicated to the pursuit of justice and communal well-being. Its inclusive dimension, which provides space for women's participation in spiritual leadership, further enriches the character of Acehese Sufism as an open and progressive tradition.

Entering the twenty-first century, Acehese Sufism faces a range of new challenges stemming from globalization, modernization, and digitalization. Nevertheless, technological advancements, the growing spiritual awareness among the younger generation, and institutional support through the implementation of Islamic law in Aceh present great opportunities for the revitalization of Sufism. By utilizing new spaces such as digital media and modern education, Acehese Sufi scholars and practitioners have been able to revive Sufi values in ways that are more contextual and relevant to contemporary society.

Therefore, Acehese Sufism is not merely a historical heritage to be preserved but also a living and transformative spiritual resource. This tradition proves that Islamic spirituality can continue to evolve without losing its authenticity serving as a bridge

between the past and the future while making tangible contributions to the formation of Acehese social and moral identity in the global era. A profound understanding of the dynamics of Acehese Sufism is thus essential not only for the study of Islam in Indonesia but also for developing a model of spirituality that is authentic, contextual, and universal for humanity's future.

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