

# URBAN SUFISM: THE NEW SPIRITUALITY OF URBAN COMMUNITIES IN INDONESIA

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## **Abstrak**

Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh tiga persoalan utama yang dihadapi oleh bangsa Indonesia setelah terjadinya perubahan politik tahun 1998, yaitu krisis ekonomi, terorisme, dan bencana alam. Dalam situasi yang sulit tersebut orang memerlukan solusi atas permasalahannya. Di sini solusi yang bersifat mental memiliki peran signifikan. Antusiasme terhadap spiritualitas di kalangan masyarakat, salah satunya sufisme, dapat dicatat sebagai satu hal yang memperkuat spiritualitas dan kepercayaan. Sufisme telah menjadi hal penting dalam kehidupan modern. Bahkan, belakangan muncul fenomena menarik di kalangan masyarakat perkotaan yang tertarik untuk memperluas wawasan tentang sufisme. Penelitian ini menitikberatkan pada pemahaman dan sejarah sufisme secara umum, kemunculan sufisme di kalangan masyarakat perkotaan di Indonesia, serta beberapa jenis dan faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhinya.

Penelitian ini adalah penelitian pustaka yang menggunakan metode hermeneutika filsafati. Unsur metodis yang digunakan antara lain: deskripsi, historis, analitika bahasa, *verstehen*, dan heuristika.

Hasil penelitian ini adalah: Urban Sufisme merupakan fenomena sosial religius dari masyarakat perkotaan yang muncul dari pencarian dimensi spiritual agama. Satu faktor signifikan yang membesarkan kemunculan gerakan ini adalah bahwa orang pada umumnya merindukan aspek spiritual dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Berdasarkan organisasi dan komunitasnya, sufisme masyarakat perkotaan memiliki beberapa bentuk yang berbeda, di antaranya adalah Komunitas Shalat Khusyuk dan Majelis Zikir.

**Kata kunci:** sufisme, masyarakat perkotaan, dimensi spiritual.

## **Abstract**

*The background of this research is three major difficulties of Indonesians after the political transformation of 1998, i.e. economic crisis, terrorism, and natural disasters. In the difficult situation they need a solution. Here, mental solutions (e.g. spirituality and religiosity) have a significant role. Excitement of spiritualism in the urban and rural community is a matter that strengthens local spirituality and beliefs, for example sufism. Sufism has become a necessity of modern society life. Nowadays there is an interesting phenomenon of the urban community stretching to the study of Sufism. This study focus on understanding Sufism and its history in general, emergence, types, and contributing factors of Urban Sufism in Indonesia.*

*This research is a library research which uses philosophical hermeneutic method. Elements of the method are description, historical, language analytics, *verstehen*, and heuristics.*

*The results of this research are: Urban Sufism is a religious social phenomenon of urban society arising from the quest on spiritual dimension of religion. One significant factor that encourages the emergence of this movement is people miss spiritual aspects which are almost missing in their daily life. Based on its organization and community, urban Sufism has different types, such as 'Salat Khusyuk Community' and 'Majelis Zikir'.*

**Keywords:** *sufism, urban society, spiritual dimension.*

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## **A. Background**

After the political transformation of 1998 and into the early 3rd millennium, Indonesian nation experienced various natural disasters and life difficulties. There are at least three major difficulties.

First, economic crisis in 1998 devastated Indonesia's economic fundamentalism. The crisis has not only caused an accelerating inflation, increasing unemployment from 10 % to 35 %, and poverty, but also has triggered a political crisis such as loss of public confidence to the government, rising corruption and crime (Sherlock, 1998: 16).

Second, terrorism increased in Indonesia. Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim nation with 90% Muslims and the remainder 10% consisting of Hindus, Christians and Buddhists. The country is often proud to indicate to the rest of the world that the majority of the Muslims in the country are tolerant moderates. However, some of the recent incidents indicate that conservative and radical organizations are in full cry pursuing their activities with impunity (Kuppuswamy, 2005: 11).

Third, natural disasters hit some areas in Indonesia. Sumatra-Andaman earthquake and tsunami killed approximately 130,000 Indonesians, more than 500,000 homeless and post-traumatic stress across a wide region of Aceh and North Sumatra. Two years later, a major disaster struck Indonesia again. A powerful earthquake of 6,3 on the Richter Scale struck central Java near Yogyakarta city on Saturday 27 May 2006. The earthquake affected 12 districts across the provinces of Central Java and Yogyakarta, 5,778 people killed, over 37,883 injured, more than 139,859 houses completely destroyed or heavily damaged and over 468,149 additional houses damaged (JRS, 2006). It was estimated that 2,111,872 people were homeless.

People who live in difficult situations need a way to solve the problem. Besides physical solutions, mental solutions (e.g. spirituality and religiosity) have a significant role as a way out of trouble. Spirituality can be a powerful source of inspiration and happiness for many people – especially during difficult times. For most people who participate regularly in a religious practice, the experience of going to a regular worship service also provides a significant connection to their creator (de Mesa, 2010: 20).

The Yogyakarta earthquake in 2006 marked the beginning of a new consciousness of national reflection on the various disasters. At first a religious song was aired on a private television station which then spread to other television stations. *Shalawat*, title of this song, which was popularized by Imam Busyri of Alexandria, concerns love

for Allah, wish and hope for His blessings by those who truly fear Him, who seek His softness in the face of unpredictable nature and suffering (Betts, 2009). This song was sung many decades ago in small mosques in rural Java, shortly before the congregational prayer performed. Now it sticks again and finds the contextual meaning in the mournful atmosphere of Indonesian nation.

In this context, the excitement of spiritualism in the community, both urban and rural, is marked by strengthening of local spirituality and beliefs such as Subud, Sumarah, Sapto Dharmo, Trinity, Tata Buwana, and other spirituality.

Another evidence of the strengthening of local spiritualism can be seen at popularity of local figures such as Ronggowarsito, Semar, and Sabdo Palon who are previously almost disappeared. Revival of these figures happens because they are considered to provide a solution for life problems of Indonesians, such as natural disasters, humanitarian crises, and many psychological disorders.

Formerly spiritualism Islam (Sufism) in Indonesia was born and flourished only in rural communities, especially in traditional Islamic boarding schools. *Tariqa/tarikat* as a form of Sufism practice is mostly practiced by rural communities. Then, it has changed. Sufism has become a life necessity of modern society. Even, there is an interesting phenomenon that urban community studies Sufism intensively and massively.

Enthusiasm of the urban community in spiritualism can be seen from, for example, emergence of spiritual groups such as the Anand Ashram of Anand Krishna, Meditation Club, Yoga Club, Reiki, Bioenergy and others. Furthermore, the enthusiasm also appears in Islamic spiritualism (Sufism). It can be proved by raising of Sufism study in luxury hotels, best selling of Sufism books, increasing of participant quantity of spiritual training, such as ESQ and *Salat Khusyuk*, *Zikir Akbar*, *muhasabah*, *istighosah*, and returning of various Sufi *tarikah* (Biyanto, 2006: 15).

The mass religious consciousness was followed by other forms of consciousness, includes awareness of community, neighbourhood, work, and even government. Mass media and television wrote and broadcasted religious programs more frequently. Finally a new religious consciousness emerged in the society. Further religiousness has a broader meaning, more mature, applicative, and even pragmatic. It is interesting because religious life is relatively stagnant for several years ago It was seen as daily routine rituals, and tended to be exclusive and fanatic.

Now followers of different religions begin to develop tole-

rance and cooperation. They realize that true religious attitudes and opened minds are needed to solve community problems. Thus the emphasis is not on the formal side of religion, but on the spiritual side that emerges in forms of social action and social piety. It can be said that esoteric religion that had been buried in the Indonesians consciousness emerges in the social life.

This study will focus on understanding of Sufism and its history in general, emergence, types and contributing factors of the Urban Sufism in Indonesia.

## **B. The Term of Sufism**

Before discussing about Urban Sufism in Indonesia, we will briefly explain the meaning of Sufism.

Two origins of the word ‘Sufi’ have been suggested. Commonly, the lexical root of the word is traced to *ṣūf* (صوف), “wool” which refers to simple cloaks of early Muslim ascetics. Although not all Sufis wear cloaks or clothes of wool. Another etymological theory states that root of the word ‘Sufi’ is *Safa* (صفا) which means purity. Sufism is emphasized on purity of heart and soul. Another theory says that *Tasawuf* (Sufism) is derived from ‘theosophy’ (Greek) which means the science of divinity.

Others suggested that the etymology of ‘Sufi’ is derived from “*Ashab as-Suffa*” (Friends of Porch) or “*Ahl as-Suffa*” (People of Porch) which is a group of Muslims at the time of Prophet Muhammad who spend their time in the porch of Prophet Mosque and dedicate their time to pray.

Some mainstream scholars of Islam define Sufism as simply the name for the inner or esoteric dimension of Islam (Godlas, 2000: 12). René Guénon in *Insights into Islamic Esoterism and Taoism* (Sophia Perennis, 2003) contends that Sufism is the esoteric aspect of Islam which is supported and complemented by exoteric practices and Islamic law. Issues of Sufism discussion relates to morals and manners which are related to efforts to sincerity, humility, *tawadhu* (humble), *muraqaba* (closer to God), *mujahada* (earnestly carry out the commands of God), patient, *tawakal* (surrender to God) and others.

Place of Sufism in the Islamic system can be traced from three main elements of Islamic doctrine. They are: *Aqidah* (belief, faith), *Sharia* (religious law), and *Ihsan* (charity, moral behaviour).

Based on the hadith of Umar bin Khattab, the *Aqidah* includes faith in God, Angels, Prophets, Holy Books (Koran, Bible, Torah and the Psalm/Mazmur), the judgment day, and the destiny of God. *Sharia* covers *Syahada* (the profession of faith: there is no god other than



Allah and Muhammad is His messenger), *Salat* (five times prayer), *Zakat* (charity for poor people), Ramadan fasting, and performing *Hajj* for Muslims who have a physical and financial ability. *Ihsan* is a moral attitude in life to feel nearness of God and believe that God always watches what people do. The point is remembrance and realization of God's presence in everyday life. *Ihsan* then leads to ascetic attitudes which is the goal of Sufism.

Discipline of Sufism in Islam emerged around the 3rd century Hijriya or 9th century C.E.. Sufism is a continuation of religious life that is ascetic in the Prophet's Mosque (Basyumi, 1969). This initial phase is called the phase of ascetic (asceticism) which is the beginning of Sufism in Islamic civilization. This situation is characterized by people who pursue the Hereafter life so that they concentrate on worship in their daily life and ignore the worldly life.

Another opinion says that Sufism emerged in the political conflict among Muslims in the era of Caliph Uthman ibn Affan and Ali ibn Abi Talib. Political disputes and power struggles among the Muslims continued after the period of Uthman and Ali Caliph. Then people reacted to this situation. They assumed that politics and power is dirty and rotten. They made an '*uzlah*' movement, which withdrew from the worldly life which is often deceptive and misleading. After that, the mysticism movement was born, which was spearheaded by Hasan Al-Bashiri in the 2nd century Hijriya, and was followed by other figures such as al-Tsauri Shafyan and Rabi'a al-'Adawiyah (Solikhin, 2005).

Sufism is a common phenomenon that occurs in almost all Muslim countries in the post-modernism, even in countries of Muslim minorities such as the US and the UK (Azra, 1999). It happens because modernism is considered unable to solve spiritual needs of modern society. In fact, Seyyed Hussein Nasr, an Iranian thinker of Sufism and Professor of Islamic Studies at the George Washington University, reveals that failure of the modernist in response to spiritual needs results in the loss of spiritual values as the spirit of human life. The result is the alienation of life, meaningless, and cases of suicide increases with the loss of the spiritual dimension (Nasr, 1982).

In Indonesia, Sufism is different from the place of origin. After it encountered with religious cultures of Indonesians such as local beliefs, Hinduism and Buddhism, Sufism has no longer rejected the worldly life, but united and became soul of Muslims in conducting everyday life. Although a new spirituality emerges in Indonesia as an effect of emergence of life difficulties and natural disasters, this paper will only focus on the new spirituality of Islam in Indonesia, especially in urban communities.

### **C. Rise of Urban Sufism in Indonesia**

The term of ‘Urban Sufism’ became popular after Julie D. Howell (2003: 10) used it in the anthropological study of Sufism movement that is prevalent in urban areas in Indonesia. History of Urban Sufism in Indonesia can be traced from Hamka thoughts in his book *Tasauf Modern*, in 1939. Hamka has emphasized on the importance of appreciating substantive values of Sufism without having to be bound by the provisions of Tarikat. Later, Abdul Hadi, the poet, performed Sufi poetry readings, especially works of Hamzah Fansuri, so that many Muslims were interested in Sufism.

Around the 1980s, activities of Sufism in urban areas began to be institutionalized. It is characterized by establishment of the Yayasan Paramadina of Nurcholis Madjid. Through teaching activities and courses, Nurcholis explained Sufism to be more interesting for the urban community who needs spiritual values.

Other similar institutions were also growing, such as Tazkiya Sejati of Jalaluddin Rahmat, and IIMAN of Haidar Bagir as a center of development of positive Sufism. These institutions also organize various activities such as courses and trainings to present materials of Sufism. The activities attracted many participants who are generally the middle class.

Mass media also has an important role for spreading Sufism in the urban communities. Not only the *Republika* daily or *Panji Masyarakat* magazine which is oriented to Islam, other printed media such as *Reuters*, *Suara Pembaruan*, *The Jakarta Post*, *Indonesian Observer*, *Media Indonesia*, *Gamma*, *Gatra*, *SWA*, and *Tempo*, often display articles or reportages of Sufism. Various articles in the mass media and books of Sufism have contributed to socialize the esoteric aspects of Islam into the urban societies, who have a broad access to sources of information.

The phenomenon of Islamic Sufism rising among the urban community is an interesting matter because Sufism is often identified as traditional rural activities, even it is regarded as a symbol of backwardness. Now, studies of Sufism are done in five-star hotels, offices, and luxurious places.

Goal of Sufism is to approach God through remembrance, prayer, and rigorous self-discipline to follow God’s commands. In a *tarikah* group as one form of Sufism, the goal is formulated into religious practices that are guided by a *Guru* or *Murshid*, where students (*salik*) who have previously been inducted will be led to the practice of remembrance and prayer which is a tradition of *tarikah*. Contrasted with

*tarikat*, participants of urban Sufism also perform *zikir* and prayer, but they are not inducted to become a member and mentor of the group is not positioned as a *Murshid*. Here, two forms of the urban Sufism in Indonesia will be briefly described.

### **1. *Majelis Zikir***

*Zikir* means remembrance of God or realization God's presence in every aspect of life. In general *Majelis Zikir* organizes its activities into three forms.

They are: first, people sit together and perform *zikir* (remembrance of God) many times quietly. Incantations (*lafadz*) of *zikir* are: *Tahmid* (*Alhamdulillah*, thank God), *Takbir* (*Allahu akbar*, magnify the Lord), *Tashbih* (*Subhaanallaah*, sanctify the Lord), *Tahlil* (*Laa ilaaha illallaah*, There is no god but Allah), and *Istighfar* (*Astaghfirullah*, plead forgiveness of God). Second, people sit together to read and learn *al-Qur'an* where one reads and others listen (*tadarus al-Qur'an*). Third, people learn, discuss, and engage in dialogue about Islamic knowledge (*majelis 'ilm*) (<http://alhujjah.com/index.php/manhaj/71-majelis-Zikir>).

*Majelis Zikir* was initiated by Ustad Arifin Ilham in 1997. The *Majelis* is greeted enthusiastically by urban communities. Starting from the Mosque al-Amr Bittaqwa in Mampang Indah Dua, Depok and *zikir taubat* (remembrance repentance) activity in various places in Jakarta, *Majelis Zikir* spreads to major cities in Indonesia.

*Zikir* rite which is led by Ustadz Arifin Ilham is also regularly aired on television, and published in other medias, such as the *Republika* daily, Radio City Music FM 105.45, and the *Hidayatullah* magazine. Thus, echo of the ritual spreads and penetrates the urban communities life.

### **2. *Salat Khusyuk* (Solemn Prayer) Training**

*Salat Khusyuk* will be achieved only by people who have a spiritual awareness that he/she will meet his Lord in prayer.

*Salat Khusyuk* Training is an activity undertaken to provide skills and knowledge to achieve solemn prayers, such as practicing tranquility (*tuma'ninah*) in prayer, understanding incantation (*do'a*) in prayer, and believing that the prayer is a medium of communication between man and God. Purpose of the *Salat Khusyuk* training is to train and motivate participants to make the prayer as a means to communicate with God, and feel responses of the performed devotions and prayers.

Subjects of *Salat Khusyuk* training are philosophy of *Salat*

*Khusyuk*, consciousness godless, submission to God, dialogue with God, and prayer exercises.

*Salat Khusyuk* training which is pioneered by Ustad Abu Sangkan, is usually held in a luxury hotel for two days by paying the expensive cost. Nevertheless, it is still followed by many people, especially the upper middle class. Furthermore, the training is organized by forming *halaqoh* groups where a trainer reviews and evaluates *Salat Khusyuk* practice of participants once a week. The *halaqoh* (meeting) groups then join and create a *Salat Center* (SC) in each city. Now thousands of members spread to various *Salat Centers* in Indonesia, such as SC Jakarta, SC Yogyakarta, SC Solo, SC Bandung, and others.

#### **D. Conclusion**

Urban Sufism is a religious social phenomenon of urban society which arises from the quest on a spiritual dimension of religion. Social aspects which relate to its activities are embodied in a form of religious organization in which a *murshid* or *imam* is appointed as the leader of the group.

One significant factor that encourages emergence of the phenomenon is people miss spiritual aspects which are almost lost in their daily life.

Based on its organization or community, Urban Sufism has different forms, such as *Salat Khusyuk* Community and *Majlis Zikir*. However, there are some similar characteristics. They are: their location in urban areas; their followers are the middle economic class; their activities are organized in nice places like in hotels, offices or companies, and led by a charismatic person.[ ]

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