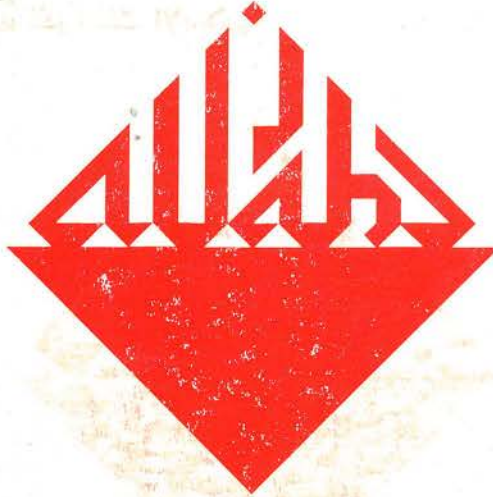


# STUDIA ISLAMIKA

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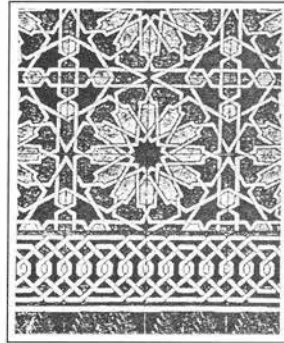
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## Urban Sufism: The New Flourishing Vivacity of Contemporary Indonesian Islam

By Dadi Darmadi

*I*ndonesia has maintained strong ties through social, economic and religious reciprocities with the heartland of Islam and corresponding to similar developments in other part of the Muslim world.

As the largest Muslim country in the world, Indonesia is commonly known as a unique site for various forms of sociological representation of Islamic beliefs. Since at least the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Islam has been acknowledged as a formal religion embraced by diverse communities from the coastal areas to the rural interiors of the archipelago. One of the most profound and distinctive practices accepted by many Indonesian Muslims is the Islamic mystical expression, known as Sufism. Due to its distinctive nature and teachings, Sufism has often been depicted as “low” or popular Islamic tradition vis à vis “high” and pristine Sharī’ah-oriented Islamic tradition.

In the past two decades, Indonesia has seen a significant religious development among its Muslim communities. Many people have said that

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*Islam has become stronger and more visible in many ways, including its spiritual expression. Since the early nineties, a new Islamic devotion has flourished in the form of Sufism among Muslim urbanites throughout the country. Many scholars have noted this phenomenon of the growing involvement of Muslim cosmopolitans in Sufi and Tarekat movements in various groups. Despite this emergence, however, there have not been enough studies and research conducted on this topic of urban Sufism. The State Institute for Islamic Studies (IAIN) Jakarta recently held a research workshop in Jakarta, in cooperation with Griffith University and the Australia Indonesia Institute, on the growing phenomena entitled "Urban Sufism: Alternative Paths to Liberalism and Modernity in Contemporary Indonesian Islam" on September 8th-9th, 2000.*

*Several noted scholars on the subject were invited to present their papers and findings in this two-day workshop. They were Julia D. Howell (Griffith University), Azyumardi Azra (Rector of IAIN "Syarif Hidayatullah" Jakarta), Mulyadhi Kartanegara (Postgraduate Studies, IAIN "Syarif Hidayatullah" Jakarta), Jalaluddin Rakhmat (the Tazkiya Foundation, Jakarta), Moeslim Abdurrahman (the Jakarta Post) and Komaruddin Hidayat (Paramadina Foundation/Ministry of Religious Affairs). The participants invited to this workshop included a number of lecturers from IAIN "Syarif Hidayatullah" Jakarta, researchers from PPIM-CENSIS IAIN Jakarta, editors of *Studia Islamika* journal, students of the Graduate Studies of IAIN Jakarta, and several research fellows from Jakarta-based research institutions such as IiMAN and Paramadina. Most of the participants were selected for their involvement in the study of Sufism in Indonesia both theoretically and sociologically.*

*This activity was the second phase of a proposed four phase cooperative plan to be held by those Indonesian and Australian institutions. The other activities include a seminar on "Urban Sufism" held in Jakarta 25-26 January 2000 (phase 1) which was a cooperation with the Agency for Religious Research and Development, Ministry of Religious Affairs. In the near future, those institutions plan to carry out an international conference on "Sufism and the Modern in Islam: Revisiting the Sociology of Islam" (phase 3) which has been proposed to be held in December 2001, and a Cooperative Research Program on "Islam and Modernity in Indonesia," (phase 4) in 2001-2002 (intermittent).*

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*Sufism in urban communities has been an interesting phenomenon and an area of concern for several notable scholars. Mitsuo Nakamura (1980), Martin van Bruinessen (1995), and Julia D. Howell, Subandi and Peter L. Nelson (1998) have indicated, and to some extent, emphasized the resurgence of interest of urban Muslims in the study and practice of Sufism in major cities all around Indonesia. This is significant because Sufism has long been associated with rural cultural and religious practice. Moreover, such scholars as Ernest Gellner (1981) previously depicted Sufism as a popular tradition of Islam that would soon vanish as a more modern and reformed Islam became widely accepted among Muslims.*

*Another finding by M. Thoyibi (1996) has revealed that Sufi group memberships have not only engaged average Muslims but also have included well-educated, middle-class and urban Muslims and various Islamic social and religious organizations. Previously, Nakamura has argued that Sufi nuances exist among Muhammadiyah followers. It has been widely known that Muhammadiyah is a modernist Muslim organization whose teachings and doctrines have been inclined to rather modern and purified ideas of Islam.*

*The above explanations suggest at least two things: first, there has been a resurgence of interest in Sufi teachings and practices among Indonesian Muslims. Second, there has been a proportionate shift from its rural social basis toward more urban communities. This also implies that in recent development, Sufism has changed from being rural and counter culture in nature, with a sense of martyrdom of the disenfranchised into a well-disposed spirituality among the cosmopolitans. The research workshop mainly focused on these two points of departure and attempted to explore more possibilities and challenges in making sense of this urban Sufism.*

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*Even though “urban Sufism” is a recognized term, several scholars participating in the workshop criticized it. What is the meaning of “urban” when it is related to “Sufism”? Who belongs to this group and how is it distinct from “regular” Sufism? Some participants argued for a clarification of terms such as “urban Sufism” and “Sufism and urban society.” However, more importantly, many have been wondering what is the impetus for the increasing attraction to Sufism for urbanites. Is there any relation between the failure of political Islam and this growing attraction*

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to Sufism? What effect does the traditional dichotomy between *Shari'ah* and Sufism have? Is there such a contemporary Indonesian understanding of Sufism? Or is there such a renewed textual understanding of Sufism? Julia Howell of Griffith University who initiated the meeting proposed these preliminary but deeply rooted questions.

Several forms of Sufism still exist in the society. Azyumardi Azra has pointed out that there are at least three groups of Sufi followers: first, orthodox or conventional Sufism. This group has existed not only in rural areas but also in urban communities. Second, urban Sufism, which is a form of Islamic devotion which allures many Muslim urbanites and not necessarily closely associated with pre-existing Sufi groups. Third, student Sufism found mostly at public universities such as the Gadjah Mada University and the Bandung Institute of Technology.

The majority of the participants found it difficult to accurately portray this recent phenomenon for several reasons. There have not been enough studies and research done in this field. Although many have suggested that this is happening in many major cities in Indonesia, there has not been any single mapping research for these urban Sufi groups, let alone their institutional profiles and their leaders. However, it is widely known that these religious groups cannot be disconnected from their previous religious and cultural background. As Azyumardi Azra suggests, many major conventional and traditional Sufi groups such as Naqshabandiyah, Rifa'iyyah, Tijaniyah and Shadziliyah—most of which have been associated with rural religious groups—have become dominant groups in urban areas with massive followers.

Meanwhile, Jalaluddin Rakhmat, a leader of a Sufi group developed among the members of the Jakarta-based Tazkiya Foundation, affirmed that Sufism is profoundly appreciated among well-educated, middle-class and urban Muslims. This Islamic devotion is commonly regarded as an alternative to a more rigid *fiqh*-oriented representation of Islam, which many Muslims no longer view as appropriate for their spiritual needs. Moreover, he suggests that Sufism in many ways can be considered as a path to liberator even revolution. "Sufism," he added, "is a liberalism rooted in religious ethics."

Another speaker, Komaruddin Hidayat, based on his own observation and experience, has proposed that there are at least five reasons behind the resurgence of Sufism in Indonesian contemporary Islam: (1) searching for a meaningful life, (2) maintaining intellectual enrichment, (3) relieving psychological problems, (4) looking for religious and class justifi-

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cation, and (5) economic interest. He also adds that these five reasons are struggle common to many urbanites, including Muslims. Therefore, he suggests, it is not surprising that such teachings as Sufism, which emphasizes spiritual values and inner meaning of the self, has engaged many Muslim urbanites. He jokingly recounts that many ibu-ibu (mature or middle-aged women) have been actively engaged in pengajian (religious gatherings) because they have some family problems at home. Many of these women enjoy participating in these religious gatherings including Sufi practices because they often find these relieve their psychological distress and give them a kind of spiritual security. Komaruddin Hidayat himself has been widely known among Jakarta middle-class Muslims for his notable speeches and lectures on Islam at Paramadina Foundation.

Moeslim Abdurrahman, who has been known for his anthropological studies on Sufi groups and their relations to politics, has come up with rather different perspectives. He observes that there have been many strong indications that Sufism cannot be cut off from politics, especially for those with traditional Islamic background. NU (the Nahdlatul Ulama), for example, has recently experienced a change in orientation from previously being a traditional, religious organization into becoming a political force. In the past, especially in the 1970's, many respected religious and Sufi leaders were approached to join political groups and support the government. Kiayi Mustain of Jombang was a very respected Sufi leader with tremendous followers and was known for his adjacent affinity with the Golkar ruling party. In today's Indonesia, a similar phenomenon has also occurred. Many religious activists and leaders, some of whom are known for their strong interest in Sufism, have also been involved in politics. Abdurrahman asserts that there has been a tendency of expanding patronage among Muslims in their view of the world from a merely spiritual dimension into a political one. He also mentions that such influences can be reciprocal between Sufism and modernism. He has conducted research on Indonesian middle class Muslims on pilgrimage. He has found modernity and spiritual devotion to be inextricably intertwined among those middle-class Muslims in Indonesia. Therefore, he suggests that Sufism among different classes of society may manifest diversified patterns of Sufism, both in their religious and cultural expression.

No later than two weeks after this workshop, GATRA, one of the leading Indonesian news weekly magazines, reported a nine-page special investigation untitled, "New Vivacity of Urban Sufism" (Gatra, 10/30/2000). The report highlighted the growing attraction of urban communi-

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ties in many major Indonesian cities to learn and practice Sufi teachings. While it summarized various aspects discussed and addressed in the "Urban Sufism" workshop, Gatra has also described a number of interesting examples of this urban Sufism phenomenon from Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Kediri, Bogor, and Martapura, South Kalimantan. A recent TIME magazine report on the growing tendency among modern and urban people to search for new values and teachings out of such formal religions referred to the tendency as "McSpirituality." "McSpirituality" is closely associated with what some people describe as the global tendency toward "McDonalization"—taken from the famous name of a fast-food franchise company—that penetrates almost every aspect of life in the modern world.

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