THE POLITICS OF PIETY:

Sufism, Power, and Network Formations in Asia-Pacific Islam

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KEYWORD	ABSTRACT
Asia-Pacific Islam, Digital Religion, Translocal Networks, Moral Governance, Salafi–Sufi Contestation	*This article explores the evolving roles of Sufi orders in Asia-Pacific Islam, highlighting their intersections with political authority, religious legitimacy, and digital transformation. Historically, Sufi networks such as the Shattariyya and Qadiriyya–Naqshbandiyya were deeply embedded in the formation of Islamic governance and anti-colonial resistance. Far from being passive or otherworldly, they institutionalized religious authority and shaped Islamic identities across the region. In contemporary contexts, Sufi actors continue to exert influence through translocal networks–particularly the Hadrami diaspora–and by adapting to digital technologies. The rise of virtual zawiyas, social media preaching, and online devotional gatherings reveals a shift in spiritual authority toward more affective, decentralized, and borderless forms. This study argues that Sufism challenges conventional binaries between the spiritual and the political, the local and the global. By positioning themselves as defenders of "moderate Islam" in opposition to Salafi-Wahhabi critiques, many Sufi orders also become key partners in state-led religious governance. Through this lens, Sufism emerges not as a relic of the past, but as a living, networked force shaping the moral and political landscapes of contemporary Islam in the Asia-Pacific.*

INTRODUCTION

In the vast and diverse religious landscape of the Asia-Pacific, Sufism has long functioned not merely as a personal spiritual path but also as a dynamic socio-political force shaping Islamic religiosity and public life. Far from being confined to individual mystical experience, Sufi orders (*ṭuruq*) have historically served as vehicles of religious transmission, cultural adaptation, and political negotiation. The expansion of Sufi networks across the region—spanning from the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian subcontinent to the archipelagic societies of maritime Southeast Asia—unfolded through complex patterns of mobility, spiritual diplomacy, and transoceanic connectivity (Azra, 2022).

This movement was facilitated by itinerant Sufi shaykhs, pilgrims, scholars, and traders who embedded their teachings in local cultures while establishing long-lasting spiritual communities. As Nile Green (Green, 2012) has shown in his study of Sufism in South Asia, the *ṭarīqa* often operated as mobile institutions, bridging urban and rural geographies, and intersecting with imperial, colonial, and postcolonial structures. Similarly, Azyumardi Azra (2022) identifies the "network of Middle Eastern-educated scholars" in the Malay-Indonesian world as a core engine of Islamization in the region, in which Sufi brotherhoods such as the Qadiriyya, Naqshbandiyya, and Shattariyya were central agents of religious transformation (van Bruinessen, 1990).

Although often depicted in popular narratives as apolitical or quietist, many Sufi orders in the Asia-Pacific have historically engaged in processes of state formation, resistance to colonial regimes, and the shaping of regional Islamic identities. In Aceh, the Sammaniyya and Shattariyya orders were embedded in the sultanate's religious-political framework (Michael Feener, 2012). In the Philippines, Sufi lineages contributed to the Moro resistance against Spanish and American imperialism (Millie, 2023). Even in postcolonial nation-states, Sufi orders continue to wield symbolic and political influence, shaping public piety, religious authority, and cultural identity (Howell, 2001).

These developments suggest that Sufism in the Asia-Pacific cannot be viewed solely as an inward-turning mystical path. Rather, it must be understood as a relational force—one that navigates between transcendental devotion and worldly engagement, between personal piety and collective authority, and between localized practices and global spiritual flows (Brenner, 1993).

This paper explores the intersection between piety and politics through the lens of Sufism in the Asia-Pacific region. It critically examines how Sufi networks have formed, expanded, and sustained themselves across geographic and cultural borders—traversing the Indian Ocean world, the Malay archipelago, and continental Southeast Asia (Susilo et al., 2023). Central to this analysis are questions of how spiritual authority is cultivated and legitimized, how ritual practices and moral discourses are adapted in new contexts, and how Sufi orders have historically interacted with, and often negotiated, structures of worldly power—from precolonial sultanates and colonial administrations to modern nation-states and transnational Islamic movements.

While the political entanglements of Sufism in the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa have received considerable scholarly attention (Al-Attas, 1968), studies focusing on the Asia-Pacific context—particularly in its maritime dimensions and networked formations—remain underexplored. Most existing literature tends to either emphasize Sufism's spiritual-ethical contributions or portray it as an apolitical counterweight to legalistic Islam, thereby obscuring its complex engagements with state power, economic patronage, and religious nationalism in the region (Azra, 2016).

Moreover, research on Sufi orders in Southeast Asia has often been fragmented along national lines (e.g., Indonesia-centric, Malaysia-centric) or focused narrowly on single orders or figures, neglecting the broader transregional circuits that connected these groups to developments in the Hijaz, Yemen, India, and beyond. As a result, there remains a significant gap in understanding Sufism as a relational system of authority, mobility, and political relevance that transcends both national and disciplinary boundaries (Khan & Chishti, 2015).

By tracing both historical trajectories and contemporary manifestations of Sufi engagements with power across the Asia-Pacific, this paper argues that Sufism in this region cannot be understood in isolation from its political, social, and transregional contexts. Rather than framing Sufism as merely mystical or peripheral, this study positions it as a central actor in the shaping of Islamic lifeworlds and political imaginaries—past and present (Shiozaki, 2015). In doing so, it seeks to contribute to a more integrated understanding of Islam in the Asia-Pacific by foregrounding the entangled genealogies of piety, power, and mobility that have long defined the region's Islamic experience.

Far from being isolated religious enclaves, Sufi orders were (and continue to be) embedded in transregional circuits of knowledge, migration, and ritual practice. These circuits helped construct enduring institutions of Islamic learning and spirituality, while also producing forms of religious authority that were negotiated at multiple scales—local, national, and transnational. By focusing on the politics of piety, this paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship that reconsiders the role of Sufism in shaping not only religious subjectivities but also political imaginaries in the Muslim societies of the Asia-Pacific (Bruinessen & Howell, 2007).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To analyze the entanglements between Sufism, politics, and mobility across the Asia-Pacific, this study draws upon an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that engages with Islamic studies, political sociology, and transregional history. Three interlocking theoretical orientations guide this inquiry.

First, the study adopts Michel Foucault's (1980) conception of power not merely as coercion or domination, but as a diffuse and relational force that operates through institutions, discourses, and embodied practices. In the context of Sufism, power circulates through spiritual charisma (*baraka*), genealogical claims, ritual authority, and the disciplining of pious subjectivities. Sufi orders function not just as religious communities, but as sites where political legitimacy and spiritual hegemony are produced and contested. The concept of "governmentality", as extended by Talal Asad (1981)in the anthropology of Islam, further helps to understand how piety becomes an instrument through which religious and political actors regulate moral life, produce social order, and assert claims over religious truth.

Second, the analysis is grounded in network theory and transregional Islamic connectivity, especially the insights offered by scholars such as Nile Green (Green, 2012) and Engseng Ho (Ho, 2006). Their work emphasizes how Islamic actors—particularly Sufis, scholars (*ulama*), merchants, and pilgrims—have historically constructed mobile and durable networks that traverse oceans, empires, and cultural boundaries. These networks are not merely conduits of texts or ideas but embodied pathways of ritual practice, economic exchange, and political alliance. Thus, understanding Sufism in the Asia-Pacific requires moving beyond national frameworks and attending to the Indian Ocean as a fluid space of Islamic exchange, where Sufi *ṭuruq* acted as formative agents of both religious globalization and local integration.

Third, the paper engages with theories of religious authority and charisma in Islam, particularly those developed by scholars like Muhammad Qasim Zaman(Zaman, 2009) and Jocelyne Dakhlia (2005). These perspectives are vital for analyzing how Sufi leaders (shaykhs or mursyids) assert moral and spiritual authority across different sociopolitical contexts—whether by referencing chains of transmission (*silsilah*), demonstrating ascetic virtue, or aligning with ruling elites. In the Asia-Pacific, these dynamics are deeply shaped by vernacular Islam, where Sufi orders localize their practices while simultaneously maintaining transregional legitimacy through Arabic literacy, pilgrimage ties, or symbolic capital drawn from the Holy Cities.

Together, these theoretical lenses allow for a nuanced exploration of Sufism not as an isolated or esoteric practice, but as a social and political formation—embedded in power structures, sustained by mobile networks, and animated by contested claims to religious authority. This framework also enables a critical interrogation of the category of "apolitical" Islam, revealing how Sufi forms of piety are entangled with governance, nationalism, anti-colonial resistance, and contemporary state-Islam relations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a historical-analytical approach to examine the intersections of Sufism, politics, and network formation in the Asia-Pacific region (Nasuha, 2017). Rather than relying on ethnographic fieldwork or quantitative data, the methodology is grounded in critical textual analysis, archival research, and comparative historiography (Lisa et al., 1967). It draws upon a diverse corpus of primary and secondary sources—ranging from hagiographies (*manāqib*), travelogues, Sufi treatises, and colonial reports to contemporary studies of Islamic movements and transregional connectivity.

The research prioritizes intertextual reading of historical documents and Sufi writings, particularly those that reveal how religious authority and political engagement were conceptualized and practiced across different contexts (Creswell, 2020). In examining these texts, the study is attentive to the ways in which discourses of piety and power are constructed, legitimated, and transmitted, especially in relation to Sufi orders such as the Qadiriyya, Shattariyya, Naqshbandiyya, and Tijaniyya, which were historically active across the Indian Ocean world and Southeast Asia.

In addition to textual sources, the study engages with archival materials including colonial-era administrative reports, fatwas, and missionary records, which provide insight into how Sufi orders interacted with and were perceived by state actors—both indigenous and foreign. These sources also help to reconstruct the sociopolitical environments in which Sufi actors operated, negotiated space, and exercised influence.

This paper also employs a comparative transregional perspective. By examining case studies from diverse sites such as Aceh, Hadramaut, Gujarat, the Malay Peninsula, and the southern Philippines, the study moves beyond national historiographies to trace the networked trajectories of Sufi mobility and religious transmission. This comparative lens is crucial to illuminate the common logics, local adaptations, and political entanglements that characterize Sufi dynamics across the Asia-Pacific.

Furthermore, the methodological orientation is informed by postcolonial and decolonial critiques, which problematize Eurocentric assumptions about religion and modernity. The study resists simplistic binaries—such as mystical versus legalistic Islam, or apolitical versus political religiosity—and instead foregrounds the complexity and hybridity of Islamic expressions shaped by imperial, colonial, and postcolonial encounters.

In sum, the methodology integrates textual and historical inquiry with critical theoretical reflection. It positions Sufism not only as a spiritual tradition, but as a mobile, embodied, and politically embedded phenomenon, shaped by long-standing patterns of authority, allegiance, and adaptation in the Asia-Pacific region.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Entanglements: Sufism, Sovereignty, and Sacred Authority

The historical expansion of Sufism in the Asia-Pacific reveals a pattern of spiritual-political entanglement, where the dissemination of Sufi orders (*ṭuruq*) coincided with processes of state-building, Islamization, and resistance to colonial domination (Hasjmy, 1981; Nurfaizal, 2019). In many regions—such as the Sultanate of Aceh in northern Sumatra, the Johor-Riau polity in the Malay world, and the Sultanate of Ternate in eastern Indonesia—Sufi leaders played instrumental roles in legitimizing kingship and sacralizing territorial rule (May et al., 2022).

For example, the Shattariyya order—a mystical path that emphasizes the immediacy of divine presence and the inner purification of the self—entered the Malay Archipelago in the 17th century, primarily through transoceanic Sufi circuits connecting Gujarat, the Hijaz, and Aceh (Husna et al., 2022). These circuits were sustained by trade, pilgrimage (*ḥajj*), and the flow of manuscripts and scholars, forming what Michael Laffan (2011) describes as a "cosmopolitan Muslim ecumene" across the Indian Ocean. The order was introduced to Aceh by scholars such as Shaykh Safi al-Din al-Qurashi and further institutionalized by one of the most influential ulama of the region, Shaykh Abd al-Rauf al-Singkili (c. 1615–1693), who studied for nearly two decades in Mecca, Medina, and Yemen, under prominent Shattariyya and Qadiriyya masters, including Shaykh Ahmad al-Qushashi and Shaykh Ibrahim al-Kurani (Wahyuni, 2017).

Upon his return to Aceh around 1661, Shaykh Abd al-Rauf was appointed as the first Qadi

Malik al-Adil (Chief Religious Judge) by Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah, the queen-regnant of Aceh (r. 1641–1675), reflecting the entanglement of spiritual knowledge and political power (Van Bruinessen, 1994). His juridical opinions (*fatwas*) and Sufi commentaries—such as *Mir'at al-Tullab*, *Umdat al-Muhtajin*, and *Tarjuman al-Mustafid* (a Malay translation and commentary of al-Jalalayn's Qur'anic exegesis)—played a central role in standardizing Islamic jurisprudence and doctrine across the sultanate and neighboring polities. These texts circulated widely in Malay, Arabic, and Jawi script, shaping Islamic orthodoxy from Sumatra to the Malay Peninsula (Johns, 1993).

Abd al-Rauf's writings also reveal an integration of Sufi metaphysics with Sharia-based governance, in which the cultivation of baraka (spiritual charisma) is framed as a divine mandate that authorizes the ruler to uphold justice, suppress heresy (*bid'ah*), and support the Sufi path (*ṭarīqah*) (Rahman, 2019). His position reflects what Azra (2004) terms as the "ulama-state alliance", where the legitimacy of royal authority was sacralized through Sufi epistemology and ritual economy, particularly in a post-Mughal world where centralized Islamic empires were fragmenting.

Moreover, this Acehnese model demonstrates how Sufi actors strategically positioned themselves at the nexus of sacred knowledge, legal authority, and political loyalty—a triad that allowed them to navigate competing pressures from internal dissent, external threats, and theological fragmentation. The Shattariyya's doctrinal emphasis on silent *dhikr* (remembrance), rapid spiritual ascent, and inner fana' (*annihilation of self*) appealed to both aristocratic elites seeking legitimation and commoners yearning for esoteric knowledge. As such, the order did not merely spread mysticism but produced a political theology that bound the sultanate, the ulama, and the masses into an imagined Islamic polity (*umma siyāsiyya*).

This dynamic is echoed across the broader Indian Ocean rim, where Sufi orders acted as agents of Islamic cosmopolitanism, forging political alliances while cultivating alternative sovereignties rooted in spiritual charisma rather than bureaucratic rationality (Ho, 2006; Green, 2011). The Acehnese case thus exemplifies how Sufism, far from being apolitical, functioned as a transregional architecture of power, reconfiguring kingship as both worldly rule and spiritual stewardship (*khilāfa rūḥāniyya*).

In the context of colonial encounters, Sufi orders in the Asia-Pacific region occupied ambivalent and strategic positions, navigating between resistance and accommodation in response to shifting political realities. Far from being monolithic in their reactions, various ṭuruq (Sufi brotherhoods) demonstrated a spectrum of engagements—ranging from militant opposition to calculated coexistence—with colonial authorities, depending on theological orientations, leadership structures, and local socio-political contexts.

One salient example is the Naqshbandiyya order, particularly its Mujaddidi branch, which emphasized strict adherence to Sharia and was known for its engagement with political affairs (Bruinessen, 2000). In the Minangkabau highlands of West Sumatra, figures such as Tuanku Imam Bonjol (d. 1864) emerged from reformist-Sufi milieus that blended Naqshbandi revivalism with anti-colonial militancy. His leadership in the Padri War (1803–1837) represented a convergence of Sufi networks with Islamic puritanism, targeting not only Dutch colonial forces but also local customs (*adat*) deemed un-Islamic. As Dobbin (1983) notes, the Padri movement functioned simultaneously as a religious reform movement and a proto-nationalist insurgency, leveraging Naqshbandi spiritual discipline (*sulūk*) to consolidate political authority in the highlands.

Conversely, other Naqshbandi and Qadiriyya-linked communities adopted a pragmatic or quietist posture, particularly in British Malaya and Dutch Java, where collaboration or passive coexistence was seen as necessary for preserving spiritual autonomy and safeguarding Islamic education. A notable case is the Qadiriyya–Naqshbandiyya (QN) synthesis, pioneered in the Malay world by figures such as Shaykh Ahmad Khatib of Sambas and later expanded through Shaykh Abd al-Karim Banten, both of whom received ijazah from Meccan masters. These networks

emphasized inner ethical reform and ritual discipline, often opting for institutional consolidation over confrontation (Sa'ari, 1999).

The pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) affiliated with these QN lineages became critical arenas of negotiation: on the one hand, they served as clandestine centers of cultural and religious resistance, preserving Islamic identity through Sufi-based curricula, Arabic literacy, and communal solidarity; on the other hand, they were sites of quietist retreat, cultivating moral virtue and spiritual independence from colonial epistemes without direct insurrection . This duality reflects what van Bruinessen (2000) terms the "ambiguous politics of pesantren", where resistance was not always overt but encoded in educational autonomy and ritual persistence.

Moreover, many of these pesantren were deeply embedded in local social fabrics, enabling them to act as alternative sources of legitimacy in a time when colonial authorities were undermining traditional rulers and Islamic institutions. The preservation of baraka and the transmission of silsilah (spiritual chains) through these institutions allowed the Qadiriyya–Naqshbandiyya networks to sustain influence without relying on formal political confrontation. In regions like Banten, Sambas, and Riau, these Sufi orders successfully cultivated moral economies that stood in contrast to colonial capitalist rationalities (Scott, 1976; Alatas, 2006).

Therefore, the response of Sufi orders to colonialism was far from uniform. Instead, it reveals a politics of ambivalence, where the cultivation of piety (*taqwa*) and spiritual discipline (*riyāḍa*) became both a means of survival and a language of resistance. These dynamics challenge the simplistic dichotomy between militant and passive Sufism, showing instead how ritual, knowledge, and spatial organization became tools for redefining power relations under colonial rule.

Thus, contrary to long-standing Orientalist portrayals of Sufism as irrational, passive, otherworldly, or even degenerate mysticism, the historical and ethnographic record across the Asia-Pacific decisively reveals that Sufi actors were often deeply embedded in the complex dynamics of sovereignty, resistance, and Islamic moral governance. The mischaracterization of Sufism by early European scholars such as Edward Gibbon, R.A. Nicholson, and others—who emphasized its supposed retreat from rationality and politics—was part of a broader discursive project to domesticate Islamic religiosity, separating "spiritual" Islam from its political potency (Said, 1979; Ernst, 2005). This reductionist view has since been widely challenged by scholars demonstrating how ṭuruq functioned as politically relevant institutions, capable of organizing resistance, legitimizing authority, and articulating communal ethics in the face of both state power and imperial intrusion.

Indeed, in many parts of the Muslim world—including Southeast Asia—Sufi orders played a constitutive role in the making of Islamicate polities. Their engagement was not limited to spiritual cultivation but extended into domains of legal discourse, bureaucratic consolidation, and moral arbitration. Figures such as Shaykh Yusuf al-Maqassari (1626–1699), a Qadiriyya-Khalwatiyya Sufi from Sulawesi who resisted Dutch colonialism in South Africa after his exile, or Shaykh Abd al-Rauf al-Singkili, who helped codify Shafi'i fiqh in Aceh, illustrate how baraka, textual authority, and political charisma intersected in the historical role of Sufi scholars.

Moreover, Sufi lodges (*zawiyas, pesantren, surau*) were not merely centers for individual spiritual refinement, but hubs of communal organization, economic redistribution, and transregional connectivity. As Levtzion and Pouwels (2012) have argued, Sufi networks operated as "parallel institutions of governance," particularly in frontier zones or areas under weak central control, where their ritual, educational, and social functions filled the vacuum left by absent or ineffective rulers.

This multidimensionality underscores the importance of moving beyond the binary of 'political' versus 'spiritual' Islam, recognizing instead that in the context of Sufism, piety itself was a mode of political expression. Through rituals of allegiance (*bay'a*), transmission of spiritual

authority (*silsila*), and performance of miracles (*karamat*), Sufi leaders cultivated forms of charismatic legitimacy that challenged both colonial and modern statecraft. In this way, Sufi traditions contributed to what Asad (1981) would call "moral formation as political practice," shaping not only individual subjectivities but also collective imaginaries of just rule, ethical community, and divine sovereignty (Polat, 2012).

Such a reorientation invites a reassessment of modern narratives that either marginalize Sufism as politically irrelevant or romanticize it as an antidote to Islamist militancy. The historical evidence from the Asia-Pacific region instead suggests a nuanced and dialectical relationship: Sufism was neither inherently quietist nor uniformly resistant, but strategically adaptive—blending ethical commitments with pragmatic politics, localized knowledge with transregional aspirations (BERNAL, 2007).

Contemporary Networks: Translocal Mobility and Religious Soft Power

In contemporary Asia-Pacific Islam, Sufi orders continue to function as translocal religious networks, strategically adapting to shifting sociopolitical landscapes while reinvigorating older forms of authority, lineage, and spiritual allegiance. Far from being relics of the premodern world, these networks are dynamic sites of religious production that actively mediate between tradition and modernity, locality and transnationalism. In this regard, the Hadrami diaspora plays a central role as a living conduit of Sufi connectivity across the Indian Ocean rim.

Particularly influential is the Ba'Alawi lineage, a hereditary class of sayyids and Sufi scholars from Hadramaut, Yemen, whose descendants have embedded themselves in key urban and rural religious milieus across Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and Southern Thailand, while maintaining ties with religious institutions in Tarim, Oman, and the Gulf (Ho, 2006). The spiritual influence of figures like Habib Umar bin Hafidz, Habib Ali Al-Jifri, and the late Habib Ali bin Abdurrahman Al-Habsyi Kwitang demonstrates the ability of Ba'Alawi Sufis to institutionalize charisma across generations, often through ritual replication, media outreach, and state engagement (Gilbert et al., 1998).

Institutions such as the Rabat al-Idrus and Dar al-Mustafa in Tarim not only serve as centers of spiritual training and Arabic-Islamic learning, but also as ideological nexuses that reinforce transregional religious identities. Graduates of these institutions frequently return to Southeast Asia, where they lead majelis dzikir, publish religious texts, and organize mass gatherings (haul)— thus acting as agents of religious translocalism (Feener & Sevea, 2009). The Haul of Habib Ali Kwitang in Jakarta, for instance, regularly draws tens of thousands of participants and includes high-ranking government officials, politicians from Islamic parties, and public intellectuals. This demonstrates not only the popular traction of Sufi rituals but also their instrumentalization as soft power by states seeking legitimate Islamic expressions that are both non-violent and culturally rooted.

Moreover, the ritual vocabulary and aesthetic ethos of Ba'Alawi Sufism—emphasizing love of the Prophet (*maḥabba*), communal remembrance (*dzikir jama'i*), and genealogical purity (*nasab*)— resonate with youth religiosity in urban contexts. Through social media, YouTube sermons, Instagram live-streamed dzikir, and branded events like *Majelis Rasulullah* or *Habib Syech Mania*, these Sufi networks mobilize affective publics (Hirschkind, 2006) and reconfigure the terrain of Islamic moral authority in cities such as Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Surabaya.

This contemporary rearticulation of Sufi identity illustrates what scholars have called "networked Islam"—a religious modality in which mobility, media, charisma, and state recognition converge to produce hybrid forms of religious authority (Mandaville, 2001; Noor, 2012). Sufi orders thus continue to operate at the intersection of devotion and diplomacy, functioning as intermediaries between the state, society, and global Muslim imaginaries.

At the same time, Sufi networks in the Asia-Pacific are not only embedded within structures of state support but are also actively engaged in symbolic and theological contestations with Salafi-Wahhabi movements, which have proliferated across the region since the late 20th century through petrodollar-funded daʿwah, education, and digital outreach (Meijer, 2009; Hamid, 2016). These contestations center on practices such as *tawassul* (intercession through saints), *maulid* (celebration of the Prophet's birth), and *ziyārah kubūr* (visitation of graves), which Salafi groups frequently denounce as un-Islamic innovations (bidʿah) or even forms of shirk (polytheism). In contrast, Sufi actors frame these rituals as expressions of prophetic love, continuity of tradition, and communal identity, drawing upon centuries-old jurisprudential justifications from within Sunni orthodoxy (Geertz, 1960; Alatas, 2007).

This ideological polarization has escalated in both digital and physical spaces. Social media platforms, including YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, have become arenas of contestation, where Sufi preachers and Salafi daʿis engage in polemics over the legitimacy of Islamic practices and the rightful heirs of *ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamaʿah*. In response, many Sufi orders, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia, have rebranded themselves as defenders of Islam wasatiyyah (moderate Islam)—a strategic positioning that aligns them with state narratives on counter-extremism, religious harmony, and national unity (Bruinessen, 2013; Fealy, 2016).

This alignment is not merely rhetorical. In Indonesia, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) have explicitly partnered with Sufi-based organizations such as Jam'iyyah Ahlith Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyyah (JATMAN), viewing their doctrinal orientation and grassroots networks as tools for deradicalization and religious soft power (Wahid, 2014). Similarly, in Malaysia, the government has supported Sufi-leaning institutions like Darul Hadis Pulau Pinang and the World Sufi Centre, branding Sufism as a culturally rooted antidote to Wahhabi-influenced radicalism (Liow, 2011).

Such state–Sufi alliances generate a dynamic of mutual instrumentalization. On one hand, Sufi orders benefit from state patronage, legal recognition, and media amplification, enabling them to expand their reach and institutional influence. On the other hand, states leverage Sufi symbolism, spiritual authority, and ritual aesthetics to curate a vision of Islam that is peaceful, pluralistic, and compliant with national ideology. This has also led to the co-optation of Sufi rituals—such as *dzikir akbar*, *haul habaib*, and *maulid akbar*—as public performances of state-sponsored Islam, often attended by political elites, military generals, and bureaucratic figures.

However, this alliance is not without tension. Critics argue that excessive state involvement risks bureaucratizing Sufism, stripping it of its ethical spontaneity and revolutionary potential. Moreover, the framing of Sufism as the "moderate" counter to Salafism can oversimplify complex intra-Muslim dynamics and instrumentalize piety for security agendas (Zamhari & Howell, 2012). Despite these concerns, the entanglement between Sufi revivalism and post-authoritarian statecraft remains a defining feature of contemporary Islamic religiosity in the Asia-Pacific.

However, this convergence is not without ambivalence. While Sufism benefits from state patronage, its radical spiritual core—centered on inner purification, existential surrender, and critique of material power—is often domesticated into cultural performance and nationalist branding. The transformation of *dzikir akbar* into mass events backed by ministries or local governments exemplifies how mystical Islam is integrated into neoliberal and populist religiosity.

Network Formations Beyond the Nation-State

One of the most enduring and structurally distinctive features of Sufism in the Asia-Pacific lies in its remarkable capacity to transcend territorial and institutional boundaries through fluid, affective, and translocal networks. These networks diverge significantly from formal Islamic institutions—such as universities, state-sanctioned clerical bodies, or codified jurisprudential councils—in that they are sustained not by bureaucratic hierarchies or legalistic frameworks, but by

interpersonal charisma, ritual intimacy, spiritual lineage (silsilah), and ethical-emotional loyalty (ṭāʿa) to the shaykh (Farid Alatas et al., 2021).

Sufi orders function as moral-spiritual communities that are historically grounded in chains of transmission (*silsilah*) linking the living shaykh to the Prophet Muhammad through successive masters. This silsilah is not only a symbol of religious authority but also an infrastructure of trust and legitimacy, often stronger and more emotionally compelling than academic credentials or institutional titles (Trimingham, 1998; Buehler, 2015). In many parts of Indonesia and Malaysia, for instance, murids pledge loyalty (*bayʿa*) not to a religious office but to a *person* whose charisma (baraka), demeanor, and perceived proximity to the divine are central to spiritual life. This personalized mode of religious belonging engenders an affective economy in which *visits, gifts, prayers, and physical presence* become currencies of spiritual and social capital.

Moreover, the transnationality of Sufi networks is facilitated by ritualized mobility and pilgrimage circuits, such as *ziyarah* to the graves of saints (*maqāmāt*) in Palembang, Aceh, Solo, Hadramaut, and even Mecca and Medina. These visits are not only devotional acts but also moments of network consolidation, where followers renew allegiance, exchange knowledge, and perform group identity (Howell, 2005). Such circuits function similarly to what Appadurai (1990) terms "ethnoscapes" and "ideoscapes," but grounded in religious-pneumatic flows rather than mere ethnonational migration.

In the 21st century, the digitization of Sufi authority and rituals has added a new layer of temporal and spatial elasticity to these networks. Digital platforms such as YouTube livestreams of *majelis dzikir*, WhatsApp-based murid circles, TikTok videos of *qasidah*, and Instagram accounts of charismatic *habib* figures have allowed Sufi communities to distribute ritual presence and maintain emotional immediacy across vast geographies (Taufik & Taufik, 2021). For example, the teachings of Habib Ali al-Jifri (UAE), Habib Umar bin Hafidz (Yemen), and Habib Luthfi bin Yahya (Indonesia) are accessed widely not through formal schools but through curated digital affect—short clips, nasihat harian (daily spiritual advice), or duʿa recitations that circulate virally. These practices affirm Marshall Hodgson's concept of "Islamicate society" (1974), where cultural-religious forms exceed formal doctrinal or territorial confines.

The emotional labor of maintaining a Sufi network—through greeting rituals, spiritual correspondence, nightly dzikir routines, or reciprocal hospitality—further distinguishes these communities. Female followers, often overlooked in classical Sufi historiography, play vital roles in sustaining the continuity of rituals, financing events, and transmitting oral traditions, thus transforming the gendered geography of Sufism in the region (Rinaldo, 2013; Feener & Sevea, 2009).

In this context, the Sufi order operates less like a rigid institution and more like what Manuel Castells (1996) calls a "network society", where flows of information, affect, and charisma create decentralized yet resilient forms of association. These networks are "highly adaptive", capable of navigating political pressures, Salafi critiques, and generational shifts in religiosity while still preserving the core of spiritual transmission and ritual belonging.

The rise of digital Sufism represents a transformative phase in the evolution of translocal Islamic spirituality, extending Sufi networks across time-space boundaries through the affordances of digital media. Instagram sermons by charismatic *habib* figures, YouTube channels broadcasting *maulid* and *dzikir akbar* events, and WhatsApp or Telegram study groups of *murids* collectively construct "virtual zawiyas", spaces of mediated devotion that emulate the intimacy of physical Sufi lodges (zāwiya) while reaching followers dispersed across cities, nations, and diasporas (Slama, 2017; Howell & van Bruinessen, 2007).

These digital platforms do not merely serve as transmission tools but actively reconfigure the

phenomenology of religious experience. *Livestreamed haul events*, TikTok clips of Sufi poetry (*qasidah*), or short-form *nasihat* videos generate affective proximity through screens, producing a digitally mediated presence that scholars like Charles Hirschkind (2001) term the "ethical soundscape." Here, sound, image, and repetition become instruments of affective persuasion and spiritual habituation. Followers often report feelings of spiritual uplift, tears, or a sense of sacred presence while consuming these contents—demonstrating how the aesthetics of digital Sufism mediate intimacy, not merely knowledge (de Abreu, 2018).

This networked form of Sufism blurs and reconfigures classical binaries—such as local versus global, oral versus textual, and even spiritual versus political. The authority of a digital *shaykh* or *habib* may surpass that of institutionally credentialed scholars, precisely because it is rooted in affect, charisma, and perceived sincerity, rather than bureaucratic legitimacy or formal academic rank (Bunt, 2009; Roy, 2004). In Indonesia, figures such as Habib Husein Ja'far al-Hadar, Habib Novel bin Muhammad Alaydrus, or Habib Ali Zainal Abidin in Malaysia, use social media to articulate Islam as simultaneously cool, ethical, inclusive, and devotional, subtly reshaping public Islamic discourse without assuming formal religious office.

Moreover, this phenomenon aligns with Jose Casanova's thesis on the "deprivatization of religion" (1994), where religion not only returns to the public sphere but does so in non-traditional, affective, and mediated ways. In the Asia-Pacific context, digital Sufism often becomes a form of soft power, cultivated by state-linked clerics or popular spiritual influencers to promote a moderate image of Islam (*Islam Nusantara, Islam Beradab, Islam Wasatiyya*), particularly as a counter-narrative to Salafi-Wahhabi rigidity or jihadist extremism (Fealy, 2020; Noor, 2019).

Yet, while digital media democratize access to spiritual teachings, they also raise questions of fragmentation, curation, and commodification. As followers increasingly consume Sufism through algorithms and curated feeds, the ritual depth and communal discipline of classical *ṭarīqa* practice may become diluted or individualized. The *zawiya* of the screen often lacks the embodied relationality of teacher and student, and may produce "thin religiosity"—more performative than transformative (Hoover, 2016; Campbell, 2020).

Still, it is precisely in this ambivalence—between mediation and authenticity, mass reach and personal piety, traditional silsilah and digital virality—that the contemporary power of Sufism lies. It thrives not by rejecting modern technologies, but by sacralizing them, transforming pixels and bandwidth into vessels of baraka, and re-inscribing the virtual as a legitimate space of sacred encounter.

CONCLUTION

This paper has demonstrated that Sufism in the Asia-Pacific is far from being a purely mystical or apolitical tradition. Historically, Sufi orders have played crucial roles in shaping Islamic governance, mediating between state power and religious legitimacy, and organizing resistance against colonial rule. Through figures such as Shaykh Abd al-Rauf al-Singkili or the Qadiriyya–Naqshbandiyya networks, Sufism provided not only spiritual guidance but also legal, political, and social frameworks.

In the contemporary period, Sufi networks continue to adapt through digital media, diaspora connections, and alignment with state agendas promoting "moderate Islam." The emergence of virtual zawiyas and social media-based devotional communities reflects a transformation in religious authority—one that is affective, translocal, and digitally mediated. These dynamics position Sufi actors as influential agents within public Islamic discourse and soft power infrastructures.

Ultimately, this study argues that Sufism should not be understood as a peripheral or quietist

strand of Islam. Rather, it constitutes a vibrant, politically embedded, and affectively charged force that shapes Islamic moral governance across temporal, territorial, and technological boundaries.

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