



# Sufism and the Modern: Mystical Conceptions in Islamic Science and Art

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**Abstract:** Sufism in Islam is considered an ancient artifact due to its long-standing presence. Moreover, Sufism, known as mysticism in Islam, is considered illogical and irrelevant to modern science and art. This article aims to unveil the mystical concepts of Islam in modern science and art. This article uses a qualitative method, the type of article is a literature review, which analyzes in depth related to the literature of mystical conceptions in Islamic science and art. The approach used is a normative study. Data sources are obtained from literature sources related to mysticism in Islam. The research results show that, conceptually, Sufism as mysticism in Islam does not conflict with modern science and art. Sufism is able to adapt to the times, which is manifested in the activities taught by the Sufi order. (tarekat). Even more than that, Sufism is able to describe abstract concepts in modern science and art with its own language.

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## INTRODUCTION

Religion and life are inseparable. Religion, through its teachings, gives direction to its followers on how to live life. Likewise, life without religion as a way of life will be empty. Thus, the relationship between religion and life is closely related. Modern life encourages the emergence of various fields of knowledge and art as manifestations of human actualization. Sufism, as a form of mysticism in Islam through the teachings of the tariqa, often generates perspectives on knowledge and art. This is certainly interesting to study, especially since there is a common perception that Islam is a religion disconnected from knowledge. In reality, Islam has endowed its followers with the potential for intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual intelligence (Nata, 2018).

The development of science is inseparable from philosophical reasons that begin with epistemological thinking (Emily Herring, Kevin Matthew Jones, Konstantin S. Kiprijanov, Laura M. Sellers, 2019). Not only that, science can also develop from the thoughts of people who are considered to have skills. In this case, not only scientists, but scholars. If there is a view that scientists are people who are experts in the field of science, but not a few even there are ulama (religious scientists) who actually master science more than scientists in general.

This article is a development of existing research, including the work of Michael Lessnoff, who discusses the close relationship between Islam, modernity, and science (Lessnoff, 2007). Julian Baldick provides an introduction to mysticism in Islam through his study of Sufism (Julian Baldick, 2012). Although Sufism, often considered outdated, can actually adapt to modernity, as noted by J. Hill (Hill, 2021). Cetin states that there is a strong connection between Sufism and the arts. Mirbagheri and Reisi conclude that in practice, Sufism cannot be separated from music. Sara and Jessica propose the term "Portraiture" to describe the close relationship between science and art. According to them, science cannot exist without art, and vice versa (Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997).

This is an empirical research model in social science. A research that continues to be debated (Alexander Max Bauer, 2020). The data in this research is library data. Literature research requires complete data and a systematic process to compile the conclusions of the discussion (Kuhlthau, 1994). This research will describe Sufism and modernity, focusing on the concept of mysticism seen from the angle of Islamic science and art. Data is obtained from various relevant recent literature related to Sufism, Islamic science and art. Once the data is obtained, it is then presented, and analysed for generalization (Schmid, 2022).

The discussion about Sufism, science, and art has indeed been extensively explored. This article is written with the aim of describing the concepts of knowledge and art in Islam through the lens of Islamic mysticism derived from the practice of Sufism. It presents a discussion that has not been addressed before. The article seeks to examine this topic using an integrative-multidisciplinary approach.

## **METHODS**

This article uses a qualitative method, which aims to analyze in depth the relationship between mysticism, modernity (science) and Islam. This article is a literature study, which explores literature related to the conception of mysticism in Islamic science and art. Mysticism in Islam is a deep spiritual practice and understanding, known as *tasawwuf* or Sufism. The approach used is a normative study. Sources of data are obtained from literary sources related to Sufism in the modern era, this is to find the real meal and purpose of the conception of Sufism or Sufism is an Islamic teaching that has been revitalized in the modern era. Sufism can be a cure for the disease of modernization with all its negative impacts. Sufism can also provide inner coolness and *shari'ah* discipline in a balanced manner.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Sufims as Mystical Concept in Islam**

Mysticism relates to the spiritual abilities present in various religions. From this, the mystical meaning can also develop into concepts like freedom, light, love, or even nothingness (Schimmel, 1975). Since definitions can vary in meaning, mysticism in Islam is more closely aligned with the concept of Sufism. This is because Sufism pertains to the practice of spirituality within Islam (Milani, 2021).

Mysticism in Islam began to emerge in the 7th century, influenced by traditional religions of the time (Julian Baldick, 2012). This mysticism is more commonly referred to as Sufism. (Jean-Louis Michon, 2006) The mystical concepts in Islam serve as an accommodative form towards existing cultures in the practice of worship (Alam, 2019). Sufism reflects a perspective on the essence of reality, which in philosophy is known as the study of being, or ontology (Achmad Muzammil Alfan Nasrullah, 2021).

Practitioners of Sufism are called Sufis. Sufis prioritize spiritual and contemplative life, contributing to human existence in all conditions (Nasr S H., 1972). They focus more on mystical experiences that can be interpreted from various angles (Ruth J. Nicholls, Peter G. Riddell, 2020). This aspect makes the study of Sufism particularly intriguing. Through mystical experiences, one can derive understanding, knowledge, and art expressed in forms such as poetry, music, and dance.

Sufism intersects with various fields of knowledge, especially those closely related to mystical practices, including astrology, chemistry, exegesis, and even mathematics and medicine (Roger Gaetani, 2010). These were areas that Sufis explored during the height of Islamic civilization, as scholars at that time showed little interest in these domains (Lessnoff, 2007).

### **Tarekat in Sufism**

The development of Sufi orders began with the emergence of Sufism itself. The Junaidi order, which originates from the teachings of Abu Al-Qasim Al-Junaid Al-Baghdadi (d. 297 AH), and the Nurri order established by Abu Hasan Muhammad Nuri (d. 295 AH) are among the early examples. Following these, other orders developed rapidly, such as the Qadiriyya, derived from the teachings of Abdul Qadir Al-Jilani (d. 561 AH) from Jilan. Additionally, the Suhrawardiyya order was

founded by Abu Najib Al-Suhrawardi (d. 563 AH). The most widely followed order is the Naqshbandi, established by Muhammad ibn Muhammad Bahauddin Al-Uwaisi Al-Bukhari Naqshbandi in the Bukhara region of Central Asia (Bagir, 2006).

Sufism is regarded as a spiritual aspect of Islam that is studied by students. This is because Sufism is a concept that requires deep exploration and strong determination to practice (Kurniawan Dwi Saputra, 2020). There is a perception that Sufism is an integral part of Islam itself. However, on the other hand, some argue that Sufism is a concept that has existed in other religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism (Nur & Iqbal Irham, 2023).

Sufism aims to attain God, which can only be achieved through various levels and ranks of spirituality (hal and maqam) that are central to classical discussions on Sufism. These discussions are then studied through the orders followed by Sufi practitioners and followers. However, Sufis do not seek these levels within themselves; instead, they seek God in His Most Praiseworthy Essence (Nasr, 2020).

Sufism is an organized system that emphasizes the worship of Allah through experiential devotion and its practice to reach the level of ma'rifat (gnosis) (Baharudin and Nur Latifah, 2017). Orders provide a framework so that individuals prioritize a spiritual-mystical-personal dimension aimed at purifying the soul by distancing themselves from secular life (Fathan Abidi, 2021). Nevertheless, this primarily pertains to traditional Sufi orders. Sufism has evolved as an institution (tariqa) and within the context of intellectualization (John Renard, 2016).

The term "tarekat" comes from the word "thariqah," meaning the path that a prospective Sufi must take to be as close as possible to God. Tarekat then refers to an organization (tarekat), and each tarekat has a sheikh, ritual ceremonies, and specific forms of dhikr (remembrance of God) and wirid (readings) (Harun Nasution, 1978). Tarekat serves as a practical method to guide a disciple in a planned manner through thoughts, feelings, and actions, continuously leading them through a series of levels (maqamat) to experience the true essence of existence (Trimingham J. Spencer, 1998).

Individuals who are following a tarekat are called "salik," meaning those who are journeying, and their spiritual path is directed by a teacher or sheikh known as a "mursyid." (Fathan Abidi, 2021) A salik receives, understands, and practices the teachings of the tarekat imparted by the mursyid, which can be internalized as the values of Sufism. These values may manifest in mental or spiritual development through qualities like patience, reliance on God, sincerity, repentance, contentment, asceticism, and other spiritual practices. Consequently, all aspects of their life align with the teachings of Sufism or the tarekat they are following. Furthermore, tarekat has continually evolved within the context of socio-historical life to meet the demands of changing times (Agus Riyadi, 2014).

### **Sufism and Modernity**

Modernity targets all aspects of life, including the development of Sufism. As a result, Sufi groups are divided into those who are supportive of modern knowledge and art and those who remain committed to the traditional practices of Islamic mysticism, as their predecessors did. Both groups coexist within the Muslim world.

The Sufi group that continues to adhere to traditional practices bases its stance on the challenges posed by spiritual knowledge in relation to modernity (Irina R. Katkova, 2020). Sufism is seen as a solitary practice, distancing itself from the clamor of the world. Sufis reject a materialistic lifestyle and the love of worldly things. On the other hand, the modern group consists of scholars who regard Sufism as a way of life that can adapt to conditions and times while firmly holding onto the values of Sufism (Yusub, 2017).

Sufism continues to adapt to the changing times. In fact, the modern era utilizes Sufism as a method of health therapy known as psychotherapy (Lestari et al., 2024). Sufi ethics, particularly the moral teachings that should be applied in daily life to achieve optimal satisfaction, emphasizes the importance of Sufism for contemporary individuals. Studying the teachings of Sufi ethics is a

pathway to developing one's character in a way that honors God, fellow human beings, and one's own best interests (Nur & Iqbal Irham, 2023).

Sufism and modernity are two inseparable elements that are interrelated and not in conflict. Misunderstandings about both can certainly lead to detrimental errors. Moreover, this could tarnish the image of Sufism (Gitosaroso, 2015). Therefore, a comprehensive understanding is needed to address Sufism and modernity wisely.

### **Islamic Science and Art**

The definition of scientific science and art is entirely correct; but, unfortunately, the activity of the present arts and sciences does not come under this head. Some of them are directly injurious, others are useless, others still are worthless, good only for the wealthy. They do not fulfill that which, by their own definition, they have undertaken to accomplish; and hence they have as little right to regard themselves as men of art and science, as a corrupt priesthood, which does not fulfill the obligations which it has assumed, has the right to regard itself as the bearer of divine truth.

Rene Descartes stated that knowledge is light. Without knowledge, everything becomes nonexistent and remarkably dark. In a similar way, Islamic texts articulate various aspects of modern life today. It just requires adjusting the subject matter, but knowledge cannot be separated (René Descartes, 2020). The definitions of science and art cannot be opposed to each other. Both have their own systems of work, patterns, and audiences. Even if some people are interested in both simultaneously, that is an exception practiced by only a few due to the benefits they gain (Leo Tolstoy, 2010).

The dynamics between religion and science occur not only within Islam but also in various other religions. Islamic science flourished during its time and began to decline once the Muslim world was subjected to colonialism (Iqbal, n.d.). Essentially, Islamic science is a product of Islamic philosophy, where Muslim philosophers developed knowledge based on the religious foundations they understood. Islamic knowledge can be seen as an understanding based on the information found in Islamic teachings. Additionally, it can also manifest as general knowledge explored integratively through Islamic scholarship, as seen in Islamic educational institutions (Suparjo, Muh. Hanif, 2021).

Islamic art is generally held to be "the art made by artists or artisans whose religion was Islam, for patrons who lived in predominantly Muslim lands, or for purposes that are restricted or peculiar to a Muslim population or a Muslim setting." (ed. Jane Turner, 1996). Islamic art is the expression of a whole culture, intimately intertwined with religious, theological, and legal commitments. It is a way of expressing and celebrating the defining ideology of a community. It is always social and traditional, never idiosyncratic or wholly self-expressive (Madden, 2015). Art in Islam is closely related to spirituality (Nasr, 1987). Thus, Islam and art are two elements that cannot be separated. Of course, the interpretation of what is called art must align with Islamic teachings and not contradict them.

Art in Islam initially related to acts of worship, such as the construction of mosques, carpets, and calligraphy. It then evolved to encompass various forms related to Islam (Blair et al., 2014). All artworks that hold Islamic value, created by Muslims and intended for Muslim art enthusiasts, can be classified as art within Islam. The forms of Islamic art are similar to those understood in a general sense, including literature, music, painting, reliefs, and other artistic fields. Thus, the interpretation of Islamic art is very broad and continues to develop according to its context of use.

Sufism is closely intertwined with literary arts (Asnawi., 2024). This is evident in the various works of Sufi figures that continue to be enjoyed today. One of the most famous figures is Jalaluddin Rumi. These Sufi literary works express Islamic mysticism, typically presented in the form of poetry or diwan. In the context of Sufism, art is not limited to literary works alone. It manifests in various artistic forms, such as painting, which reflects the imagination of Sufi individuals. Music, often used during moments of contemplation or dhikr (remembrance of God), is also an important aspect of Sufi expression.

It is important to note that for several decades now, there have been various efforts by contemporary Muslim scholars to study and revive Islamic knowledge in response to the contemporary global crisis caused by the crisis in modern science and technology. Tawhid, as an Islamic worldview, has led to a unification of knowledge and the Islamic faith. Among the important branches of Islamic religious knowledge is Sufism. History records that Sufism, as one of the main branches of Islamic religious knowledge, has made significant contributions to Islamic scholarship since its early development.

Although we have many examples that demonstrate the mystical nature of wisdom, many Muslim thinkers, rooted in authentic tradition, penetrate the esoteric core of Islam. A brilliant example is Ibn Sina (d. 370/980), who became a true theosopher. Thus, it can be said that true Islamic philosophy is essentially mystical. Regarding the attainment of knowledge, Sufis are considered true sages in Islam because their ontological position—possessing *haqiqa* (spiritual condition)—is always perceived as higher than those who possess *qal* (conceptual knowledge), as it refers to vertical knowledge and experience. So one can put a question what bridge connects material and non-material in Islamic science? The answer is discovered in cosmology, precisely the structure of macro- and microcosmic. Perceiving and operating of cosmology needs symbolical meanings and special terminology for incorporeal world. One such term is '*barzakb*'. In Arabic lexicons, *barzakb* is defined as "barrier," "a barrier between two things," "a barrier between paradise and hell," In three Qur'anic verses, *barzakb* signifies the distance between two rivers (Sūrat al-Furqān, verse 53; Sūrat al-Raḥmān, verse 20) and between this world and the next (Sūrat al-Mu'minūn, verse 23). In Sufi and mystical traditions, *barzakb* stands for the visible world between the realm of non-material, simple meanings and that of material objects, or in Ibn 'Arabī's (d.638/1240) words, suspended forms ('*ālam al-mithāl*'). So Sufism as a science and art of spiritual learning deals with the world of imagination.

In particular, it deals with the doctrine of colorful epiphany and subtle invisible organs of human beings *lata'if* which played the important role in developing Islamic philosophy and science, especially Sufi thought and spiritual practices. Undoubtedly, this doctrine had a profound impact on such notions as 'color', 'vibration', or 'kineticism' in Islamic art. In Islamic civilization symbolical language of depicting soul has a special code having absorbed the ideas of ancient Greek philosophy, Manichean religion of light and traditions of Egyptian and Indian alchemy. But the problem is not only related to the images of soul but also to the colored space and its meaning. Moreover, it introduces two dimensions of colored space: physic or 'outer' and psychophysical or 'inner' which have a background in the Islamic doctrine of colors mostly focused on human individual perception of light. Such outlooks contradict much from the doctrine of physics and philosophers like Avicenna, or Averroes (H. Gatje).

In the tenets of Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqah*) this esoteric knowledge was developed in later centuries. Sufi literary corpus, mostly of Shattariyah, Naqshbandiyah and Khalwatiyah brotherhoods, originated in Central and Minor Asia, touches on and scrutinizes the problem of philosophy of light and the doctrine of perception of inner light by subtle organs of human being, or the phenomenon of "photism" (the term introduced by H. Corbin). It was developed by such famous Sufi Shaykhs and scholars as Najm al-Din Kubra (d.1221) and his disciples, then as-Simnani (d.1336), Muhammad Ghaws al-Gwalior (d.1563) and later on by Shah Wali Allah of Delhi. Besides, we need to mention that the doctrine of *lata'if* as a part of mystical anthropology of the 'Man of Light' was much developed on Indian soil, having absorbed Tantric Hindu-Buddhist elements, in particular, vaishnava-sahaja teaching.

Naqshbandiyah and Shattariyah medieval corpus of literature in Persia, India, Central Asia and Malay Archipelago contributed much to studying the problem of Islamization of yoga practice in India and the origin of Islamic mysticism. The studying of such texts puts quiet complicated methodological issues of translations (Ernst: Iranian Studies, 36. 2003) and terminology. While the doctrine of the identity of the microcosm and macrocosm is common to both Islamicate and Indic

tradition, the problem of practicing the sacred formulas (*mantras* and *zikir*) in different languages, Sanscrit, Tibetan, Jawi and Arabic remains the secret and intrinsic one.

No doubt, one of the most important texts for studying the influence of Indic tradition on Sufism is *The Elixir of Life (Amritakunda)*, famous source for Indian technique in Sufism, originally written in Sanskrit and later translated into Arabic (*Haud al-Hayat*) by Qadi Ruqn al-Din Samarqandi from Lakhnau during the reign of Sultan Ali Mardani (1207-1212) and then into Persian (*Babr al-Hayat*) by Muhammad Ghawth Gwaliori, one of the most influential Shattariyah masters. He completed Persian translation in Gujarat around 1550 as a commentary to the Arabic version. (MS 297/61 no. 318, Osmania University, The key role of this treatise in the process of Islamization of yoga and Tantric practices is evident. Shaykh Muhammad as-Sanusi ((1787-1859) mentions special *dhikr 'djudjiya'* based on yoga practice in his treatise *Salsabilah* (pp.126-135). It is interesting to add that Italian scholar Virolleaud M. represented a similar text from Persian manuscript (*Svarolaya*) dated by 1690 and written by the author from Bengal narrating about a tribe of yogis in one of Kashmir villages, who practiced 'science du souffle' (Virolleaud, M. e Filliozat, M. 1944) based on colorful epiphany.

Evidently, the *Elixir of Life* played a significant role in Sufi milieu and influenced many Sufi writers, especially texts of Shattariyah and Naqshbandiyah *tariqah*. Shaykhs and writers from Sumatra continued this tradition of translating and composing commentaries to these texts on the local soil (Asnawi, 2024). In Sumatra one can find the treatises composed both by prominent Shaykhs, for example, Shaykh Burhanuddin (d. 1692), the propagator of Shattariyah teaching in Western Sumatra in the 17th century and infamous writers along with anonymous treatises. So these texts put forward one more problem of translation the specific terminology of spiritual practices dealing with 'subtle centers' *lata'if* and recitation of *zikir* written in Arabic Malay (Jawi), Arabic Javanese (Pegon) and Javanese languages. Noteworthy, written heritage of Sufi authors belonging to Naqshbandiyah-Shattariyah mystical tradition in Sumatra is still less studied by scholars. Sumatra, the remote corner of Islamdom, the crossroad of many cultural traditions, became a preservation place of many spiritual practices and intellectual thoughts of Hindu-Buddhists ancient civilizations like Sriwijaya and Islamic civilizations in syncretistic form.

Moreover, this region promoted its own ideas and individuals who contributed to civilization's pattern in the field of Sufi theology, Islamic science and literature. In context of this research we cannot help mentioning the name of Dutch scholar Sn. Hurgronje, the pioneer of studying 'local Islam' in Sumatra, in particular, in Aceh. The modern studying of syncretistic form of local Islamic traditions was pioneered by L.F. Brakel who was the first to examine traditional Malay literature, especially Malay-Persian literary ties, as integral generic system and the syncretistic nature of Islam in Indonesia. Local Islam' in Sumatra is a special space of preservation of the heritage of many religious traditions, in particular, in the form of Sufi oral and written traditions and spiritual practices. The picture of the very syncretistic religious traditions in different regions of Sumatra resembles a "jigsaw pieces", to use Riddel's expression, as one can find here the Tantric influence of Indian groups like *bauls* from Bengal in Northern Sumatra, or practicing the old Sufi ritual of *suluk* in Western Sumatra.

Many Sufi treatises were written in genre of Malay poems *sha'irs* for declamation. In some collections one can find infamous historical works written in the Malay historical genre of *hikayat*, like the seventeenth century treatise *Hikayat Raja dan Sultan* (Historical narration of Rajas and Sultans) written by Shaykh Ibrahim Mufti, the founder of Surau Tuo Taram in Western Sumatra. Fully developed as a result of its relationships between local cultural traditions and different outward influences regional forms of existing Islam are self-sufficient as a rule. It is evident that only "local Islam" having absorbed all variety of regional religious traditions and closely connected with history, can correspond to the spiritual quest of people

The digital era of the 21st century demonstrated the emergence of various distinctive styles of Sufism. The study of Sufi practice and discourse in the countries of different regions illustrates how social modern forms and techniques are now among the conditions of possibility for a great

many movements that are concerned to extend the Islamic tradition. Regarding to Indonesian example many scholars - Martin van Bruinessen, J.D. Howel and M. Laffan write about the spiritual shift of society in the 21st century and interest to the values proclaimed by *tasawwuf*. The 'resurgence' of Sufism gave the impetus to the rising interest to the 'living saints' among the contemporary Muslims in Indonesia (Ahmad Muslimin, Habib Shulton Asnawi, Rahmat Dahlan, Aicha el-Hajjami, Alamsyah Alamsyah, 2024).

Along with this growing interest we still have a plenty of original texts on the Sufi doctrines of spiritual development remain unstudied and even infamous scattered in private or surau manuscript collections of the Archipelago. Nowadays we have possibility to preserve many valuable texts by digitizing. However, the next step of translating and studying is still actual as a classical linguistic method of manuscripts sources investigation for making such phenomenon as Sufi 'science-art' available for true understanding. Here I use the term 'science-art' for escaping only one relative term, which I know, that is 'alchemy'.

## CONCLUSIONS

Science and art are expressions of humanity. These expressions are expected to provide guidance for individuals in navigating life. Naturally, this must be accompanied by a system of values, as outlined in Islam. Sufism, as a mystical concept within Islam, has provided direction for its adherents to develop their potential in both science and art as a means of adapting to modernity. Sufism aligns with modern developments that call for knowledge as a solution to life's challenges. On the other hand, Sufism also expresses feelings through the realm of art, particularly in literature, music, and dance. The concepts of science and art within Sufism are approached differently from those in a general context. Therefore, the evaluation of knowledge and art within the Sufi framework must be viewed through the lens of Sufism itself as a form of mysticism in Islam. The Islamic sciences and arts from the perspective of Sufism as mysticism continue to evolve with the times. Additionally, the methods of learning Sufism within different groups (tariqahs) will likewise produce varied concepts. The interpretations of science and art will inevitably lead to multiple readings by its audiences. A wise approach is to refrain from judging these expressions as negative but instead to recognize them as part of the wealth of knowledge and art within Islam.

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