From Magics, Dances, to Cafés: The Role of Sufism in Constructing Identity among the Urban Youth

Achmad Zainal Arifin
Sociology Department
UIN Sunan Kalijaga
Yogyakarta, Indonesia
achmad.arifin@uin-suka.ac.id

Abstract—**This paper aims to elaborate the role of Sufism, especially within conventional forms of Sufism (*tarekat*) in shaping the construction of identity among the Urban Youth. The rise of Urban Sufism, as characterized by the mushrooming of Sufi-like practices among the urban Muslims across the country, such as *Majelis Dzikir*, *Shalawatan*, and other forms of religious activities, led by some influential figures, such as Arifin Ilham, Abdullah Gymnastiar, and Yusuf Mansyur, have forced some conventional Sufism to adapt to the needs of younger generations. In some cases, this changes the face of conventional Sufism, which previously associated mostly with elderly and silent activities, to be more dynamics because of the present of younger generations. Collected data from observations, interviews, and documentations are analyzed using rational choice theory to capture reasons and inflences behind the involvement of younger generation within a conventional Sufism. The study concludes that there are significant changes within a conventional Sufism in terms of ritual's goals, how to achieve them, and where the ritual is taken place. The practices of Sufism, in many cases, become a new form of identity for younger generations, especially for those from urban areas.**

Keywords—Sufism, Identity, Youth, Urban, Commodification

I. INTRODUCTION

During last decades, new models of Islamic religiosity that emphasize on experiential or spiritual aspects of Islam and new institutional frameworks for cultivating Islamic spirituality have, made significant contributions to the growing popularity of Sufism in recent years in Indonesia. The new frameworks include convocations like the '*majelis'* for the practice of popular emotive Sufi rituals like *dzikr*, *shalawat* and *mujahadah*, outside the Sufi orders, and semi-academic courses, workshops and 'training' on Sufism run on a commercial basis. As Julia Howell has shown, not only have these novel ways of organizing Sufi education and practice succeeded in increasing the level of public participation in Sufi activities across the social strata and age groups, but they have also had the effect of intensifying the commitment of many Muslims to outer acts of piety, like attending the Friday services and wearing a veil [1].

The growing popularity of new models of Sufi spiritual expression, including non-*tarekat*-based, *majelis zikir* and *shalawat* and non-tarekat Sufi associations, to some extent have worried the leaders of conventional Sufism. Such non-*tarekat* based Sufi groups are very attractive because of their practicality. Compared to conventional Sufi orders, they

seem less complicated to join and less demanding of loyalty. The leaders of conventional *tarekat*-based Sufism are alarmed, not only by 'sheep stealing' by the non-tarekat Sufi groups but by the religious quality of the Sufism promoted by them. *Tarekat* leaders question the value of spiritual guidance offered by people who do not have an accredited *nasab* (line of spiritual descent from the Prophet). They also worry about the authenticity of the *zikir* formulae taught in the novel groups and wish to retain and supervise the proper use of those formulae within the *tarekat*.

These situations have forced some conventional Sufi orders to adapt to rapid social changes, especially in responding the needs of modern people, including to the advanced of technology like the use of internet for their activities. A good example on responding these challenges is by offering online tutorials or even online *bay'ah* (taking the oath) as the first step joining certain conventional Sufi orders. These adaptations, to some extent, have created new forms of Sufi's practices which can be categorized as hybrid Sufism as these new practices tend to blend the ways of both conventional and non-conventional (urban) Sufism. Therefore, this research will further address some fundamental questions regarding how these new practices of Sufism have been marketed to the youths in big cities, particularly in Jakarta, Surabaya, Yogyakarta, and other cities throughout the country and help them in searching for their religious identity.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Most studies on Sufism around the world are dominated with exploring the teachings of Sufism and the study on Sufi orders [2, 3]. Only few studies are designed exclusively to cover more recent phenomena of Sufism, especially on the issues of urban Sufism and non-Sufi order groups. Among these few studies are done by Howell [4], Bruinessen [5], Zamhari [6], and Mintarja [7]. However, these few studies are still focus mainly to general features of urban Sufism. They are not specifically address the role of Sufism in constructing the identity of urban Muslim youth. Most studies on urban youth's identities highlights the importance of religious aspects in general, for example the teachings of Islam, certain rituals, and Islamic schools (*madzhab*). Sufism, especially the conventional one (*tarekat*), is commonly discussed in a traditional way, such as exploring

the history of certain *tarekat* or the prominent figures specific *tarekat*.

Moreover, studies on the phenomena of urban Sufism are dominated by the issue of new forms of Sufism, which tend to create the importance of social pieties rather than to analyse conventional Sufism, or Sufi orders in the sense of recognized tarekat. The emergence of some majelis dzikir (dzikr congregations) of Arifin Ilham [8], Shalawat Wahidiyah [9], and Aa Gym [10], mark the growing popularity of the new forms of new Sufism, which put away some traditional characteristics of Sufism, such as *baiah* (the need of taking oath), *tarekat*, and a unique relationship between *mursyid* (teacher) and *salik* (student) of *tarekat*[11]. The phrase "Sufism without Sufi Order" which becomes a new slogan for social piety movements among urban people [5] sounds impossible for most traditional Muslims because *tarekat* is considered as an entry point to practice Sufism [12]. It seems that conventional Sufism and Sufi Orders have been challenged by this emergence of new urban Sufism. The old-fashion of Sufi Orders have to take more serious adaptation to a changing society. Some of them responded to this challenge by simplifying their requirements to enter their *tarekat*. Naqsyabandi Haqqani Order, for example, opens a new recruitment through online *baiah* to accommodate those who are so busy and have no chance to have direct baiah with the *mursyid*. Others try to contextualize the teachings of Sufism with popular issues in society, such as nationalism [11], interfaith dialogue, and democracy [13].

Nevertheless, current phenomena of the growing numbers of youth actively engage on the practices of Sufism and Sufi orders have less attention from academicians. Study on current development of *Tarekat* Qodiriyah Naqsyabandiyah, the biggest Sufi order in Indonesia, indicates that there is a growing number of young people actively involved in the *tarekat's* activities [14]. The involvement of youth has also influence on how Sufism has been conducted. They expand the place of practicing Sufism not only limited to *zawiyah* (place for Sufi's training), but bringing them also to some cafes and creating unusual networks and identities among them. This research focuses on exploring these new phenomena, especially in revealing how Sufism and Sufi play a significant influence on directing the religiosity of urban youth Muslims.

This research employs rational choice theory for data analysis. The main fundamental feature of this theory lies on the fact that people are willing to do certain actions based on precise calculation on what they will obtain for doing those particular actions [15]. In the case of practicing Sufism among the youth, this theory helps to understand motivations of those young urban in joining Sufi orders or other similar spiritual practices. Besides, symbolic interactionism theory also will be used to help interpret some objects or symbols used during the practices of Sufism. Symbolic interactionism provides a basis for developing various meanings in accordance to different informants of this research [16]. Based on propositions provided in this theory, the meanings of some acts or objects are depended on how people react to different situations.

III. RECONSIDERING A CONVENTIONAL SUFISM

The advancement of science and technology which is one of the driving factors of modernity and globalization has led to social change in various fields, including on how people express their religiosities. Increasingly rational and pragmatic thinking of society have consequences for religious elites, especially those in institutionalized religions, to simplify their institutional rules. The reduced tendency of people to be rigidly bound by an institution and the increasing "recognition" of individual freedoms, including in expressing their religious activities, have caused a decline in the level of public participation in religious activities at official religious institutions. In the context of Western society, this can clearly be seen from the increasing number of churches left by their members. Conversely, religious groups that are looser in terms of administrative rules and emphasize more on the spiritual aspect actually experience an increase in the number of participants in their religious activities.

These changes are also clearly seen in Islamic institutions, including conventional Sufism groups (*tarekat*). At least, this study found three basic elements related to the dynamics of the adjustment process that appeared in responding to the changing of social characteristics of Muslim community. These three things are represented in the titles of this paper: magic, dance, and café.

A. Changes in Sufi Practices

The three terms used as in the titles of this article, "magic", "dance", and "café", represent three forms of changes in the implementation of Sufism practices, especially among the young Muslims in urban areas. Those three concepts symbolize motivation, forms of ritual expression, and means of carrying out the ritual. As is common in the world of *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), especially those with a strong tradition of Sufism, *santri* (students) are usually taught various forms of *dhikr* (remembrance of God) which must be carried out in their daily lives. The *dhikr* formula that is taught can be in the simplest form, for example calling repeatedly the names of Allah that are described in the *asmaul husna* (99 names of Allah) until the *dhikir* formula which is quite long; starting to be read repeatedly three times up to hundreds of thousands of times. The more complicated the *dhikr* formula that must be read by the *santri*, the higher the spiritual level of them. An important aspect that needs to be considered in this practice is the general motivation of the *santri* to pursue *fadhilah* (the virtues) of reciting certain *dhikr*. In this case, magics or supernatural powers become the main reasons for practicing this model of dhikr, as it is clearly illustrated through several literatures, which specifically discuss of the virtue of reading certain *dhikir*, such as the Samsul Maarif book, which is quite popular across *pesantren* [11, 22]. Indeed, a more specific and in-depth study is needed regarding the progress of youth actively involved within the Sufi practices which were previously dominated by the elderly because it aims to further highlight the unworldliness aspects compared to worldliness [14].

The concept of "dance" in the context of this paper refers to the increasing popularity of more various forms of religious expressions among young Muslims. Indeed, dancing as a part of the Sufi way of expressing their love for God is not something new, even the source of this activity has emerged and is popular with the figure of Sheikh Jalaludin Rumi, a great Sufi of the 13th century AD [19]. However, in the context of modern Sufism, especially those that appears in major cities in Indonesia, young people, even the few children who practice Sufi dances as part of their

daily religious expression. In addition, the variety of expressions of the practice of Sufism is no longer limited to the form of *dhikr* which is sung rhythmically, but has been accompanied by the use of music instruments that are quite dynamic. In addition, rise of some *shalawat* groups, started with Hadad Alwi and Sulis and followed by the current rising star of Nisa Sabyan, to some extent, has a significant contribution to the a wider acceptance of Muslims across the country to the Sufi and Sufi-like practices [21].

Meanwhile, the word "café" is an obvious sign of the fully involvement of the young Muslim in some urban areas. It symbolizes that Sufi practices is not merely performed in mosques or other special places called *zawiyah*, as it was commonly practiced by the elderly Muslims, but it now can take place anywhere, even within a place which is loaded by the economic or worldly symbols. Cafes, which in the context of modern society are synonymous with coffee shops, are an attractive place to chat and practice some religious rituals. This certainly cannot be from an interesting story related to the history of coffee which is used as a drink for worship experts. A Habib who was quite popular as a speaker, Habib Muthohar from Semarang, Central Java, in several of his lectures often told stories about the history of coffee. For worship experts, he explained, coffee is their loyal friend because it can help them awake to worship until morning. Therefore, he also gave an interesting statement that later the deceased person found on the body of the remnants of coffee will not be asked by angels and will go straight to heaven because it is certain that he is an expert in worship. A popular story about the closeness between coffee and worship experts can be used as a source of inspiration for the emergence of cafes as one of the places that is currently quite popular for holding religious rituals, especially in Sufi circles. In addition, it can be added sociologically that the appearance of cafes here is also one of the strategies to attract young people so that they are more interested in religious activities because cafes are now one of the symbols of modernity where young people gather and have an activity after a day of carrying out their routines at workplace. We can also read this phenomenon from an economic perspective that religious activities actually have the potential to be developed into a commodity that can be "sold" and produce promising financial benefits [18, 20].

In the context of Sufi practices, the use of cafes or some star-rated hotels as a place to learn and practice Sufism, is certainly interesting to be further observed, especially when it is related to the background of the social status of its participants. In general, it can be said that the learning process of Sufism conducted at starred hotels was firstly appeared in early decade of the 2000s, when the discourse on Urban Sufism became popular to the public through a series of workshops initiated by some professors from Paramadina University, Jakarta [5]. Along with the rapid development of workshops in Sufism, the emergence of several post-reform channel stations broadcasting various models of live- *da'wah* by presenting young and good-looking preachers, are certainly attracted the young urban Muslims. The role of professors and televangelists, who socially have respectable positions, seems to be a magnet for young Muslims to be more able to engage intensely with some religious activities, including the Sufi practices [1].

These three elements represented some fundamental changes in a conventional Sufism to adapt to the needs of young Muslims show how Sufi practices have to take into account a process of adaptation to social changes. The emergence of commodification of religion, on the one hand, tends to be viewed negatively by some Muslims, but it cannot be denied that it also contributes to the increasing participation of citizens in various forms of existing religious activities [18]. Social piety, which by most Muslims is seen more from the symbolic aspects of one's involvement in the implementation of religious rituals, certainly opens enormous opportunities for the development of various models of existing religious rituals, including in the Sufi practices.

B. Contribution of Sufism in Constructing Identity

One of the results of Sufism education and practice is the increasing level of community participation in Sufism activities that have now surpassed social strata and age, as indicated by Julia D Howell when conducted a study of the Qodiriyah and Naqsyabandiyah order in Pesantren Suryalaya, West Java Province [4, 14]. In addition, this increased level of public participation was also followed by the amplified level of commitment of most Muslims in the country to consider the importance of outward acts in determining piety, such as carrying out Friday prayers and various forms of worship in the public areas as the most visible signs of piety in daily life. At the end, the use of symbols of piety in the public sphere has a significant contribution to the formation of new identity constructions in society, especially among younger Muslims in urban areas.

Indeed, the balance of life between physical and spiritual aspects, or in other words, achieving success in the world and in the hereafter, is the goal of every Muslim's life [17]. Therefore it is not surprising that every Indonesian Muslims activities cannot be separated from the worldly and unworldly aspects. The increasing use of religious symbols in most aspects of the life of the Muslim community in this country certainly raises a shift in the existing social identity. The description of a successful life, which was previously symbolized by luxury items, such as cars, houses, and the like, is added with the symbol of religious "capitalization", such as frequency in performing hajj or *umrah*, the use of Muslim clothing (hijab and turban) and other modern icons that already wrapped in Islamic characteristics [17]. Moreover, housing developers seem to be competing to present "Islamic housing" that will guarantee the inhabitants are happy in the world and the hereafter.

This need for a changing social identity also led to the proliferation of various forms of education for young Muslims, who gave more space to religious symbols to be used freely in public spheres [20]. Hundreds of scholarships were poured out by various educational institutions, both public and private, to those who were considered to have good religious abilities, for example in memorizing the whole Qur'an or several surah of it. In addition, special terms also emerged to describe this practically new phenomenon. The terms combined the concept of worldly success with unworldly success, such as "*hafidz-preneur*" which was used as the flagship program at several universities. Such a phenomenon indicates that there is a strong desire among the younger generation of Muslims, when they went to the higher education, they do not only dream of worldly goals, but also to think about aspects of unworldly success.

The involvement of younger Muslims in various Sufis and Sufi-like activities can obviously be observed through the emergence of some Islamic groups affiliated with

particular forum, such as "Syekhermania" for those who follow the forum of Habib Syekh, or "Ahbabul Musthofa" for those who joint *Sholawatan* forum led by several Habaib. Interestingly, some professors and televangelists have also created specific groups in supporting their broadcast activities, for example the late Ustadz Arifin Ilham, Ustadz Yusuf Mansyur, K.H. Abdullah Gymnastiar (Aa Gym), Mama Dedeh, K.H. Anwar Zahid, Gus Muwafiq, and Nisa Sabyan. Each group of these figures' fans has their own characteristics, which can be a specific clothing, jargon, greeting, and icon. These religious symbols have become new identities for younger Muslims [18]. Their enthusiasms in using those symbols are usually posted through their social media accounts, ranging from facebook, Instagram, Line, and Twitter. Indeed, the role of social media in popularizing Sufis and Sufi-like activities is essential, particularly in making those activities as a new identity for young Muslims in this country.

IV. CONCLUSION

Rapid Social changes in community, especially related to the dynamics of Muslim youths, have consequences for religious institutions to make adaptations, including some conventional Sufi groups. The process of modernization and rationalization has caused people to become increasingly rational and pragmatic. The reluctance of people, especially young Muslims, to be rigidly bound by a religious institution must be creatively responded by religious elites to preserve and increase the members of their institution. The emergence of a new phenomenon of online *baiat* (oath) in the Naqshabandiyah Haqqani order, for example, is a good example of how a conventional *tarekat* conforms to these changes.

At least, there are three important factors of change that arise among conventional *tarekat*, namely: magic, dance, and café. These three terms represent how the dynamics of conventional *tarekat* respond to existing social changes, especially related to the shift in motivation of young Muslims joining *tarekat*, how they express their religiosities in practicing the Sufi rituals, and how the facilities and infrastructure have to be provided in carrying out the ritual. These three aspects provide ample space for young Muslims, especially those in urban areas to express Sufi and Sufi-like practices and make them as symbols that ultimately contribute to the construction of their identity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

REFERENCES

[1] Julia D. Howell, ""Modulation of Active Piety: Professors and Televangelists as Promoters of Indonesian Sufisme" " in *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. Greg Fealy and Sally White (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008).

[2] Martin Van Bruinessen, "Studies of Sufism and the Sufi Orders in Indonesia," *Die Welt des Islams* 38, no. 2 (1998).

[3] Clinton Bennett and Charles M. Ramsey, *South Asian Sufis : Devotion, Deviation and Destiny* (New York, NY: Continuum International Pub. Group, 2011).

[4] Julia D. Howell, "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (2001).

[5] Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell, *Urban Sufism*, Ed. 1., ed. (Jakarta: Rajawali Pers, 2008).

[6] Arif Zamhari, *Rituals of Islamic Spirituality: A Study of Majlis Dhikr*, Islam in Southeast Asia (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2010).

[7] Endang Mintarja, *Arifin Ilham, Tarikat, Zikir, Dan Muhammadiyah*, Cet. 1. ed. (Jakarta: Hikmah, 2004).

[8] Achmad Nawawi Mujtaba, *Menggapai Kenikmatan Zikir : Fenomena Muhammad Arifin Ilham Dan Majelis Zikir Az-Zikra*, Cet. 1. ed. (Jakarta dan Bandung: Hikmah; Didistribusikan oleh Mizan Media Utama, 2003).

[9] Sokhi Huda, *Tasawuf Kultural : Fenomena Shalawat Wahidiyah*, Cet. 1. ed. (Yogyakarta: LKiS : Distribusi, LKiS Pelangi Aksara, 2008).

[10] C. W. Watson, "A Popular Indonesian Preacher: The Significance of Aa Gymnastiar," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11, no. 4 (2005).

[11] Achmad Zainal Arifin, "Re-Energising Recognised Sufi Order in Indonesia," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 46, no. 2 (2012).

[12] Amsal Bakhtiar, *Tasawuf Dan Gerakan Tarekat*, Cet. 1. ed. (Bandung, Indonesia: Angkasa, 2003); Fahmy Jindan, *Mengenal Tarekat Ala Habib Luthfi Bin Yahya: Nasihat Spiritual* (Bekasi: Hayat, 2006).

[13] M. Jamil, *Cakrawala Tasawuf : Sejarah, Pemikiran & Kontekstualitas*, Cet. 1. ed. (Ciputat: Gaung Persada Press, 2004).

[14] Julia Day Howell, M. A. Subandi, and Peter L. Nelson, "New Faces of Indonesian Sufism: A Demographic Profile of Tarekat Qodiriyyah-Naqsyabandiyyah, Pesantren Suryalaya, in the 1990s," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 35, no. 2 (2001).

[15] George Ritzer, *Sociological Theory*, 8th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011); Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith : Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[16] Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1969); Joel M. Charon, *Symbolic Interactionism* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995).

[17] Aziz, A. A. (2004). *Tarekat : kesalehan individu vs. kesalehan sosial : studi dinamika tarekat Qadiriyah-Naqsyabandiyah di Darul Falah, Pagutan dan Darul Muhajirin, Praya, Lombok : laporan penelitian*. Mataram: Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri Mataram.

[18] Kitiarsa, P. (2008). *Religious commodifications in Asia : marketing gods*. London ; New York: Routledge.

[19] Friedlander, S., & Uzel, N. (2003). *Rumi and the whirling dervishes : being an account of the Sufi order known as the Mevlevis and its founder the poet and mystic Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi* (1st Parabola ed.). New York: Parabola Books.

[20] Strathern, A., & Stewart, P. J. (2005). *Contesting rituals : Islam and practices of identity-making*. Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press.

[21] Zamhari, A. (2008). The development of chanting groups in East Java: a case study of the Salawat Wahidiyyah group in Pesantren Kedunglo, Kediri [Paper in: Islamic Education in Indonesia.]. *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs, 42*(1), 125-156.

[22] Achmad Zainal Arifin. (2015), Transmitting Charisma: Re-Reading Weber Through The Traditional Islamic Leader In Modern Java. *Jurnal Sosiologi Reflektif*, 9(2), 1-30.