

The Interplay of Sufi Movements, Arts, and Cultural Expression in the Contemporary Era

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Abstract

Objective: This study examines the relationship between Sufi movements and the arts in the contemporary era. While previous scholarship has primarily explored Sufism as a spiritual and theological tradition, comparatively little attention has been given to the role of the arts as a medium of cultural expression, religious communication, and social transformation within contemporary Sufi movements. **Method:** This study employs a library research design using a descriptive-historical approach. Data were collected through a systematic review and critical analysis of scholarly literature on Sufism, the arts, culture, and contemporary Sufi movements to identify recurring themes and conceptual patterns. **Results:** The findings reveal that the relationship between Sufi movements and the arts operates through two complementary dimensions. The first is the esoteric dimension, in which the arts function as an integral component of spiritual practice and a means of inner refinement for Sufi practitioners, particularly within the *ṭarīqa* tradition. The second is the exoteric dimension, in which the arts serve as a medium for communicating Sufi teachings and transmitting spiritual values to wider audiences through culturally embedded, aesthetically engaging, and socially inclusive forms of expression. **Conclusion:** This study concludes that the arts should be understood not merely as vehicles of aesthetic expression but also as strategic instruments for communicating and transmitting Sufi teachings in contemporary society. By conceptualizing the esoteric and exoteric dimensions of Sufi art, this research contributes to the development of Islamic Sufism studies by offering a more comprehensive framework for understanding how Sufi movements negotiate spirituality, culture, and social transformation in the modern era.

Keywords: Arts and Culture; Esotericism; Exotericism; Sufism.

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Introduction

Throughout the historical development of Sufism—from its early spiritual expressions prior to its institutionalization to its subsequent formalization as organized Sufism in the form of *ṭarīqas*, understood as schools of Sufi doctrine (Rahman, 1979)—the values it has cultivated, both in relation to its dissemination and its internal spiritual dimensions, have remained inseparable from the socio-cultural order in which Sufism has emerged and evolved. In particular, Sufism has consistently interacted with cultural values manifested in the arts, literature, music, and other forms of cultural expression, which have served as important media for the articulation and transmission of Sufi teachings.

In its internal dimension, Sufism possesses a distinctive characteristic that fundamentally defines its nature, namely its mystical orientation. This mystical quality, marked by transcendence, profundity, and complexity, has often been regarded as analogous to the aesthetic dimension embodied in artistic creation. Consequently, it is unsurprising that many Sufi figures have become closely associated with literary works and poetic compositions that articulate their spiritual experiences. Such expressions have functioned as effective vehicles for the propagation of Islam by emphasizing values of romanticism and poetic sensibility, or, in other words, by inviting rather than judging others (Mawardi, 2017). Within this context, many—though not all—Sufis have demonstrated a profound appreciation for Islamic literature, particularly works rooted in the Sufi tradition. Sufi narratives and hagiographical accounts are richly imbued with symbolic meanings, combining didactic purposes with mystical elements. A notable example is the hagiography of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (1079–1175), who is traditionally believed to have communicated with jinn and to have guarded the gates of Hell in order to intercede for and protect his followers.

Sufism constitutes a spiritual tradition deeply rooted in both the Quran and the Prophetic legacy (*Sunnah*) of the Prophet Muhammad. Historically, it has developed as a spiritual path that spread across diverse regions, cultures, and linguistic communities while remaining unified by the spiritual authority of the Quranic revelation and the exemplary model of the Prophet Muhammad. Over time, this tradition gave rise to various Sufi orders and communities that embraced mysticism as a way of life, emphasizing the purification and transformation of the soul in its journey toward God. Within this framework, the Sufi path has been understood as a process of spiritual perfection culminating in the realization of intimacy and union with the Divine (Emst, 2003).

From its external dimension, the relationship between Sufism and the arts constitutes an important medium for the dissemination of Islamic teachings. In many societies, music and other cultural expressions have functioned as effective vehicles through which Sufi values are communicated and integrated into local social and cultural traditions (Anders Hammarlund, Tord Olsson, 1997). In this sense, Sufism represents a humanistic and axiological approach to religious propagation, one that harmonizes ethical and aesthetic values while rejecting coercion and violence. Through its close affinity with the arts and cultural expressions, Sufism creates a spiritual harmony capable of inspiring the human heart and awakening a deeper awareness of the majesty and presence of God.

At present, a growing body of scholarly literature provides important references for examining the relationship between Sufi movements and the arts from the perspective of contemporary academic research. Among the prominent international scholars are Razia Sultanova, Leonard Lewisohn, and others who have explored the intersections of Sufism, culture, and artistic expression. In the Indonesian context, significant contributions have been made by scholars such as Said Aqil Siradj, Rista Dewi Opsantini, Gustia Tahir, Tiara Retno Wulandari, Widayat Mintarsih, Maghribi & Hidayah, and Zein Muchamad Masykur.

Razia Sultanova, for example, investigates the influence of Islam and Sufism on women's poetry in Central Asia. She argues that this influence is manifested in three principal dimensions: women as mystics engaged in Sufi spiritual practice, women as creators of Sufi-inspired poetry, and women as singers and musicians participating in Sufi musical traditions. Through these interconnected roles, women have made significant historical contributions to the development and transmission of Sufism in Central Asia (Sultanova, 2007).

Leonard Lewisohn examines the concept of *samāʿ* (sacred listening) as a form of Islamic sacred music within the Persian Sufi tradition. From an epistemological and theological perspective, he argues that *samāʿ* has become a deeply rooted spiritual practice across the Islamic world, although it has developed under different names and forms according to diverse geographical settings and cultural traditions. Consequently, each region has adopted its own terminology and distinctive expressions of this spiritual-musical practice, reflecting the linguistic and cultural characteristics of its people (Lewisohn & Lewisohn, 2008). Similarly, Said Aqil Siradj explores the significance of *samāʿ* within the intellectual tradition of Sufism. His discussion begins with the longstanding jurisprudential debates concerning the permissibility of music in Islamic scholarship and culminates in an analysis of the epistemological foundations of music as a legitimate medium of spiritual experience in Islam (Siradj, 2013).

In the Indonesian context, Rista Dewi Opsantini specifically investigates the manifestation of Islamic values in the performances of the multicultural Sufi dance group in Pekalongan. She argues that religious art functions as a medium for expressing religious messages, while Sufi dance embodies Islamic values through both its visual and auditory dimensions. The visual elements include choreography, costume, makeup, stage properties, and performance settings, whereas the auditory dimension is represented by musical instruments and devotional poetry that collectively reinforce the spiritual meaning of the performance (Opsantini & Artikel,

2014). Likewise, Gustia Tahir explicitly examines the presence of Sufi values in the song lyrics of the Indonesian musician Ebiet G. Ade. According to Tahir, these lyrical expressions resonate with the Sufi tradition, in which music serves as a spiritual medium capable of bringing individuals into closer communion with God by touching the deepest recesses of the human heart and facilitating inner contemplation (Tahir, 2022).

Heni Siswantari examines the performativity of Sufi dance within the Mawlawiyyah Order at Maulana Rumi Islamic Boarding School in Yogyakarta. She argues that the public performance of Sufi dance serves as a medium for transmitting positive spiritual energy generated through collective *dhikr*. Furthermore, Sufi dance possesses distinctive characteristics because it originates from the spiritual tradition initiated by Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī and is intrinsically associated with the Mawlawiyyah Order (Siswantari et al., 2023). Likewise, Tiara Retno Wulandari and Widayat Mintarsih investigate the symbolic meanings of Sufi dance and explore its potential as an intervention medium in multicultural counseling. They contend that, within the Sufi tradition, Sufi dance should not be understood merely as a form of religious expression but also as a dynamic meditative practice endowed with therapeutic value for promoting individuals' psychological balance and well-being (Wulandari et al., 2025).

Maghribi and Hidayah analyze Ibn Taymiyyah's critical perspectives on the practices of *samāʿ* (Sufi music) and *raqs* (Sufi dance) as part of his broader epistemological and theological project to purify Sufism. Their study draws primarily upon Ibn Taymiyyah's *Kitāb al-Samāʿ wa al-Raqṣ* and *al-Istiqāmah*, while also considering the interpretations of his disciple Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah and comparing these views with the arguments advanced by al-Ghazālī, thereby situating the debate within the broader landscape of contemporary Islamic thought (Hidayah, 2025). Meanwhile, Zein Muchamad Masykur explores the concept of the "symphony of *maʿrifah*" through a Sufi semiotic-hermeneutic approach. He argues that, within the Sufi tradition, music functions not merely as an aesthetic expression but also as a transformative spiritual medium through which practitioners cultivate higher levels of spiritual consciousness and attain transcendent meanings (*maʿrifah*) (Masykur, 2025).

The foregoing review of the literature provides a substantial epistemological foundation for a comprehensive examination of the relationship between Sufi movements and the arts. Building upon these studies, this article identifies an underlying structure of Sufi reasoning that has frequently been articulated in an

apologetic manner. It argues that the relationship between Sufism and the arts cannot be separated from the collective historical memory of Muslim societies, particularly in regions where Sufi scholars, many of whom were also accomplished poets and litterateurs, played a pivotal role in the dissemination of Islam. In the Indonesian context, the historical spread of Islam throughout the archipelago is inseparable from the contribution of various *ṭarīqas*, which propagated Islamic teachings through culturally embedded approaches, including literature, artistic expression, music, and other forms of local cultural practice.

The principal contribution of this article to the field of Islamic Sufism lies in its attempt to reconstruct the historical-normative foundations underlying the relationship between Sufi movements and the arts. To the best of the author's knowledge, this dimension has received only limited scholarly attention, particularly in studies that explicitly examine the intersection of Sufism and cultural arts. While existing scholarship has significantly enriched the understanding of Sufism and its cultural manifestations, most studies have addressed these issues in broad or thematic terms rather than offering a systematic and focused analysis of the historical and normative framework that has shaped the enduring relationship between Sufi movements and artistic traditions.

Method

This study employs a *library research* design, as it is based on the systematic collection, examination, and critical analysis of scholarly literature concerning the relationship between Sufism and the arts. The research seeks to describe and interpret theoretical perspectives as well as intellectual discourses within the Sufi tradition that address artistic and cultural expressions. As a form of library research, the study relies on the identification, selection, and analysis of relevant academic sources, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the existing scholarship on the subject. Furthermore, the research adopts a descriptive-historical approach to examine the development of ideas concerning the relationship between Sufism and the arts within their historical and intellectual contexts (Bakker & Zubair, 2021). The primary sources consist of classical and contemporary Sufi texts examining the relationship between Sufism and artistic or cultural practices. Secondary sources include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, edited volumes, and electronic publications that provide historical, theoretical, and analytical perspectives. Together, these sources offer a comprehensive foundation for understanding the intellectual

development and contemporary discourse on the relationship between Sufism, arts, and culture.

Results and Discussion

Sufi Movements in Music and Dance

The lives, teachings, and spiritual experiences of Sufi communities have made significant contributions to the formation of cultural environments in which various forms of Sufi artistic expression have flourished. One of the most prominent manifestations of this interaction is the emergence of Sufi literature, a literary tradition that articulates Sufi doctrines, beliefs, and spiritual experiences through aesthetic forms of expression (Sudardi, 2003). Within the Sufi tradition, knowledge of God is commonly understood as *kashf* (spiritual unveiling), referring to an intuitive mode of knowing that transcends rational cognition and is often conveyed through symbolic, imaginative, and experiential language. Because such mystical experiences are difficult to express through ordinary discourse, Sufi poets have traditionally employed poetry to communicate profound insights concerning God, the cosmos, and the human soul. For many Sufis, poetry constitutes the most appropriate medium for articulating the deepest and most mysterious relationship between human beings and the Divine—namely, the reciprocal experience of loving God and being loved by Him.

Throughout the history of Islamic civilization, poetry has occupied a central position as one of the most influential forms of literary expression, accessible not only to the literate but also to wider audiences through oral transmission. In many regions of the Muslim world where Arabic was not the native language, literary traditions in Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Malay, and other Islamic languages played an essential role in disseminating Islamic worldviews and spiritual teachings, often extending their influence beyond formal religious instruction. Consequently, many of the most celebrated poets in Islamic civilization were themselves Sufis or prominent exponents of Sufi thought, whose literary works became powerful vehicles for communicating spiritual knowledge and ethical values (Chittik, 2002).

The prominence of artistic expression within the Sufi tradition is inseparable from the transformative nature of the mystical path itself. Through prolonged spiritual discipline, self-purification, and rigorous ethical cultivation, Sufi practitioners seek to attain higher stages of spiritual realization in which they experience manifestations of divine love, mercy, and knowledge. At these advanced stages of the mystical journey, spiritual experience frequently surpasses the limits of rational language. Consequently, Sufis often resort to aesthetic, symbolic, and paradoxical forms of

expression to communicate realities that cannot be adequately conveyed through logical or discursive reasoning alone (Netton, 2001). From this perspective, artistic forms such as poetry, music, and dance are not merely aesthetic creations; rather, they function as epistemological media through which ineffable spiritual experiences become communicable within human culture.

The relationship between Sufism and the arts is most clearly manifested in Sufi music and sacred dance, both of which occupy a significant place within the spiritual life of many Sufi communities. The use of music in Sufism is closely associated with the successive stages of the spiritual journey (*sulūk*) toward intimacy with the Divine. Traditionally, this journey is understood as unfolding through three hierarchical stages. The first is the stage of purification, in which lower desires (*nafs*) are disciplined and diminished through spiritual practices such as *zuhd* (asceticism). The second is the stage of spiritual expansion, during which the practitioner's consciousness is progressively enlarged, enabling the transcendence of ordinary perception and the attainment of a broader, even cosmic, awareness. The third is the stage of union with Ultimate Truth, characterized by the spiritual stations of *fanā* (annihilation of the self) and *baqā* (abiding in God). Within this framework, music assumes its primary function during the second stage, serving as a spiritual medium that facilitates the expansion of consciousness and enables practitioners to transcend the limitations of ordinary perception (Sudirman Teba, 2003).

One of the most prominent artistic expressions within the Sufi tradition is *samāʿ*, a mystical or spiritual musical gathering performed as an act of devotion by followers of certain Sufi orders. Despite its longstanding presence in Islamic spirituality, the religious legitimacy of *samāʿ* has remained the subject of considerable theological and juridical debate. While melodious recitation is widely accepted in Islamic practices such as the *adhān* (call to prayer) and *tajwīd* (Quranic recitation), other forms of vocal music and the use of musical instruments have often been criticized or even condemned by some jurists and schools of Islamic law. According to Nicholson, the spiritual significance of music within Sufi rituals depends fundamentally upon its symbolic interpretation. Whether understood symbolically or literally, however, *samāʿ* has generated enduring controversies not only among Islamic legal scholars but also within the Sufi tradition itself, where differing perspectives continue to shape debates over its theological legitimacy and spiritual efficacy (Nicholson, 1970).

Among the major figures of classical Sufism, al-Ghazālī offers one of the most influential defenses of music and dance as legitimate components of spiritual practice. In his view, music possesses the capacity to awaken a deeper love for God and to

stimulate profound spiritual ecstasy and inner illumination. Under such conditions, the human heart is purified, becoming, in his metaphor, like silver refined in a furnace. Through this process, Sufi practitioners become increasingly conscious of the spiritual realm to the extent that awareness of the sensory world gradually recedes. Nevertheless, al-Ghazālī strongly emphasizes that participation in mystical music and dance should not occur without the guidance of a qualified spiritual master (*shaykh*). He recounts the well-known advice of Shaykh Abū al-Qāsim al-Jurjānī, who responded to a disciple requesting permission to participate in Sufi dance by instructing him to undertake three days of rigorous fasting before preparing an appealing meal. If, after this discipline, the disciple still desired participation in the dance rather than worldly pleasures, permission could then be granted. This narrative illustrates al-Ghazālī's conviction that individuals whose hearts remain attached to worldly desires, even if they have begun the Sufi path, should be prevented from participating in mystical dance, as such practices may generate greater spiritual harm than benefit when undertaken without adequate moral and spiritual preparation (Al-Ghazali, 1988).

The debate concerning the relationship between Sufism and the arts has continued into the modern period. Philip Lewis, citing a prominent Muslim scholar from India, notes a prophetic tradition that associates the widespread prevalence of singing, dancing, and entertainment with the signs preceding the Day of Judgment (Schimmel, 2000). Similar concerns had already been expressed centuries earlier by renowned Sufi scholars. Among them was al-Hujwīrī (d. 1075), the celebrated author of *Kashf al-Mahjūb* (*The Unveiling of the Veiled*), who criticized the excessive or indiscriminate practice of *samāʿ*. Rather than rejecting it outright, however, he established a number of ethical and spiritual conditions to prevent its misuse. These included the presence of a qualified *shaykh*, restricting participation to committed disciples, ensuring that dervishes remained fully conscious throughout the ritual, and requiring participants who experienced spiritual ecstasy during *samāʿ* to refrain from disturbing others. These conditions demonstrate that classical Sufi authorities generally viewed music and dance not as autonomous artistic performances but as disciplined spiritual practices whose legitimacy depended upon proper guidance, ethical restraint, and spiritual maturity (Rieb, 1990).

***Samāʿ* in the Niʿmatullāhī Sufi Order**

Among the major Sufi orders, the Niʿmatullāhī Order is one of the traditions that has consistently incorporated music as an integral component of its spiritual practice,

albeit within the doctrinal framework of its own teachings. Within this tradition, adherence to the *sharīʿa* establishes ethical and ritual boundaries governing devotional practices, including restrictions on certain forms of dance and rotational bodily movement. Consequently, *samāʿ* in the Niʿmatullāhī tradition typically consists of the recitation of *dhikr* accompanied by rhythmic hand-clapping and, on some occasions, simple musical instruments such as small drums and flutes (Rieb, 1990).

The spiritual masters (*shaykhs*) of the Niʿmatullāhī Order further developed a rich symbolic vocabulary encompassing motifs such as wine, music, mystical gatherings (*samāʿ*), and communal assemblies. Within this symbolic framework, *samāʿ* is understood as a mystical state experienced by Sufi practitioners in response to melodious chanting and emotionally evocative musical rhythms. During moments of profound spiritual absorption, when the mind becomes emptied of ordinary thoughts, practitioners may spontaneously display bodily movements that observers often perceive as a form of sacred dance (Rieb, 1990). Accordingly, *samāʿ* is interpreted not merely as an auditory experience but as a process of attaining heightened spiritual awareness and discovering mystical states. Such experiences are commonly accompanied by a temporary suspension of ordinary cognitive functions, including reflective judgment and self-conscious awareness, as the practitioner becomes immersed in a deeper level of spiritual consciousness (Khan, 2002).

In the contemporary Niʿmatullāhī tradition, *samāʿ* continues to occupy a central place in the spiritual life of the order. The dervishes of the Niʿmatullāhī Order are guided by comprehensive teachings on *samāʿ*, most notably those compiled by Javad Nurbakhsh, whose writings serve as authoritative manuals for practitioners (Rieb, 1990). These teachings emphasize that the spiritual ecstasy (*wajd*) generated through *samāʿ* should never be understood as a superficial emotional experience, nor should Sufi dance be regarded as a form of entertainment. Rather, *samāʿ* is conceived as a transformative spiritual discipline through which practitioners transcend the material realm and symbolically enter the angelic or suprasensible world, thereby deepening their awareness of the Divine (Michon, 2003).

Drawing upon the teachings of Shaykh Rūzbihān Baqlī al-Shīrāzī (1128–1209), three distinct categories of *samāʿ* can be identified: *samāʿ* appropriate for ordinary believers, *samāʿ* intended for the spiritual elite, and *samāʿ* reserved for the elite among the spiritual elite (Ernst, 1996). This classification reflects the Sufi understanding that the spiritual efficacy of *samāʿ* depends upon the practitioner's level of inner purification and spiritual maturity. Similarly, al-Ghazālī distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate forms of *samāʿ*, formulating a comprehensive ethical

framework consisting of approximately twenty principles governing its proper practice (Al-Hujwiri, 2003). These principles emphasize spontaneity in spiritual response, the presence and guidance of a qualified Sufi master (*shaykh*), the absence of ostentation or pretension, and the practitioner's complete physical and spiritual concentration upon God. They also explain why the chants and devotional poetry employed during *samāʿ* generally consist of mystical verses rather than direct recitations of the Quran (Al-Hujwiri, 2003). Furthermore, classical Sufi authorities stress that the organization of a *samāʿ* gathering must carefully consider its appropriate time, place, and participants. Although *samāʿ* is widely regarded as a spiritually beneficial practice, it is not considered universally appropriate; rather, its performance is subject to specific ethical and spiritual conditions, including guidance concerning the selection and use of musical instruments (Rieb, 1990).

Classical Sufi literature also provides an extensive discussion of the experiential dimensions of *samāʿ*, particularly through three interrelated concepts: spiritual perception or understanding, *wajd* (ecstatic spiritual experience), and bodily movement as an expression of mystical realization and, in some contemporary interpretations, as a medium of spiritual healing (Qurtuby & Kholiludin, 2024). Sufi scholars further distinguish between the *wajd* experienced by novice practitioners and the more profound ecstatic states attained by accomplished dervishes. Within this framework, the bodily movements associated with *wajd* may at times resemble sacred dance, representing an advanced stage of spiritual realization. In such moments, a dervish may become so intensely absorbed in longing for God that spontaneous rhythmic movements, stamping of the feet, or circular motions emerge naturally as embodied expressions of the soul's aspiration toward union with the Divine (Rieb, 1990). Rather than being understood as mere artistic performance, these movements are interpreted as outward manifestations of profound inner transformation and mystical consciousness.

***Samāʿ* in the Qādiriyyah Order**

Within the Qādiriyyah Order, the practice of *samāʿ* reflects the Sunni Sufi orientation associated with al-Ghazālī's intellectual legacy (Shihab, 2001). This tradition is particularly evident in the Qādiriyyah communities of the Indian subcontinent, where *samāʿ* is closely connected with the musical genre known as *Qawwali*. Performed by professional musicians (*qawwāls*), *Qawwali* functions as an integral component of Sufi spiritual exercises and devotional gatherings. Its performance typically features one or two lead vocalists accompanied by traditional musical instruments and supporting

singers. In this context, *Qawwali* should not be understood merely as a musical performance but rather as a spiritual assembly intended to facilitate the realization of Sufi objectives through devotional listening (*samāʿ*) (Muhayya, 2003). For Sufi practitioners, participation in *Qawwali* constitutes an act of worship designed to cultivate mystical love (*maḥabbah*) and, ultimately, to evoke states of spiritual ecstasy (*wajd*), which occupy a central place in the Sufi mystical experience (Muhayya, 2003).

Across several major Sufi orders on the Indian subcontinent, *samāʿ* provides the essential spiritual framework through which practitioners attain *wajd*, an ecstatic state that signifies the experiential discovery of God's presence. Within the Chishtiyyah Order, for example, *samāʿ* has long been embraced as a legitimate and indispensable component of the spiritual path. This illustrates the close and enduring relationship between Sufi orders and musical practice. Through its rhythm, melody, and emotional resonance, music possesses a remarkable capacity to facilitate the attainment of *wajd*, thereby serving as an important aid in the practitioner's spiritual journey. Schimmel notes that the Naqshbandī scholar Mīr Dard of Delhi composed a treatise defending the use of music within the Sufi tradition and regularly organized musical gatherings for both himself and his disciples. Likewise, within the Mawlawiyyah Order, practitioners embrace the experience of ecstatic whirling as an expression of cosmic joy, simultaneously embodying emptiness before God and participation in divine greatness. In these traditions, music is understood not simply as an artistic medium but as a spiritual witness that accompanies the contemplative perception of the divine mysteries and facilitates the soul's encounter with transcendent reality (Schimmel, 1975).

Poetry and Verse in the Sufi Tradition

The relationship between Sufism and the arts extends beyond music and dance to encompass poetry and literary expression, which have long occupied a central place in the Sufi intellectual and spiritual tradition. In his introduction to *Unveiling the Hidden: The Mysteries of God in Islamic Mystical Poetry* by Annemarie Schimmel, Saini K.M. observes that mysticism, Sufism, and poetry are often perceived as detached from the complexities and turbulence of everyday life and therefore as offering little contribution to addressing contemporary social problems. Although such an assumption is understandable, it is ultimately inadequate. On the contrary, both Sufism and Sufi poetry provide profound existential meaning, enabling individuals to interpret and experience life through a deeper spiritual lens. Consequently, an

appreciation of Sufism in general—and Sufi poetry in particular—is indispensable for understanding one of the most significant dimensions of contemporary religious life and spirituality (Schimmel, 2005).

The close relationship between Sufism and artistic expression is further reflected in the literary works of some of the most influential Sufi figures in Islamic history, including Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207–1273), ‘Umar Khayyām (1048–1131), Hamzah Fansuri (d. 997 AH/1589 CE), and Muḥammad Iqbāl (1877–1938) (Sudirman Teba, 2003). Among these figures, Rūmī occupies a particularly prominent position through his monumental *Mathnawī*, a six-volume masterpiece comprising approximately 26,000 verses. Widely regarded by scholars as one of the greatest works of Islamic mystical literature, the *Mathnawī* presents the spiritual journey of the human soul in its quest for union with the One. An extensive body of scholarship has already examined Rūmī's mystical poetry from diverse intellectual perspectives, including the works of Muslim scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Nasr, 1987) (Chittick, 2001). Therefore, a detailed analysis of Rūmī's poetry falls beyond the scope of the present study.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that through his mystical poetry, Rūmī consistently emphasizes the significance of *ikhtiyār* (human free will and moral choice), arguing that genuine human agency must always be grounded in faith in God, since faith alone ultimately leads to salvation in both this world and the hereafter. A comparable spiritual vision is found in the celebrated *Rubā‘iyyāt* of ‘Umar Khayyām, whose quatrains frequently portray God as both the Divine Potter and the Supreme Artist (*al-Muṣawwir*), while simultaneously reflecting upon the transience of human existence. Khayyām suggests that the creation of humanity and the cosmos originates in God's love for the highest treasures of divine knowledge. Yet, like finely crafted pottery, human beings inevitably return to dust, reminding readers of the fragility and impermanence of worldly life (Asghar, 2012). Through these poetic expressions, Sufi literature transforms aesthetic language into a vehicle for communicating profound metaphysical and spiritual truths, thereby reinforcing the enduring relationship between Sufism and the arts.

Similarly, Hamzah Fansuri, the renowned sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Malay Sufi poet, expressed most of his intellectual and spiritual ideas through poetry. His mystical verses, deeply influenced by the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the Unity of Being), have generated enduring theological and intellectual debates within Indonesian Islamic scholarship (Sudirman Teba, 2003). Likewise, Muḥammad Iqbāl is widely recognized not only as a distinguished Muslim philosopher but also as a Sufi-

inspired poet whose literary works addressed both spiritual and socio-political concerns. Following his participation in the Islamic Conference in 1932, Iqbāl composed a number of poems reflecting upon the plight of Palestine and the broader condition of the Muslim world. Deeply concerned by the fragmentation of the Islamic community, particularly within the Arab world, he criticized the internal divisions that had weakened Muslim civilization despite its shared spiritual heritage. As he poignantly remarked, "Once you were one nation; now you are divided. It is you who have divided yourselves" (Sudirman Teba, 2003).

In the contemporary Indonesian context, figures such as Kuswaidi Syafie, Abdul Hadi W.M., D. Zawawi Imron, and Mustofa Bisri (Gus Mus) represent important references for understanding the enduring relationship between the Sufi tradition and literature, particularly mystical poetry. Collectively, these writers may be regarded as a contemporary "Sufi literary quartet," distinguished by their sustained engagement with contemplative literature and their profound exploration of Sufi spirituality through poetic expression. Among them, Kuswaidi Syafie is especially noteworthy for his collection *Tarian Mabuk Sufi (The Dance of the Intoxicated Sufi)*, a volume of mystical poems that can be understood as reflecting his personal spiritual experiences and inner contemplative journey within the Sufi path (Syafi'ie, 2003). Their literary works demonstrate that Sufi poetry continues to function not merely as an aesthetic endeavor but also as a medium for spiritual reflection, ethical formation, and the transmission of mystical values in contemporary Indonesian Islam.

Islamic Calligraphy and Architecture

The relationship between Sufi movements and the arts is also evident in the visual arts, particularly in the tradition of Islamic calligraphy. Modern Islamic calligraphic painting first emerged in Iraq and Iran during the 1950s before gradually spreading throughout the Muslim world, including Indonesia. Among the pioneers of this artistic movement were Shakir Hassan Al Said of Iraq, Hossein Zenderoudi of Iran, and Kamal Boullata Quraishi of Palestine, whose works combined the classical aesthetics of Arabic calligraphy with modern artistic expression while preserving the spiritual essence of Islamic art (Sudirman Teba, 2003).

Islamic calligraphy has long been regarded as a form of sacred or spiritual art rather than merely a visual aesthetic tradition. This perspective is aptly captured in the celebrated statement of the classical calligrapher Yāqūt al-Mustaʿsimī: "Islamic calligraphy is a spiritual geometry brought about with material tools." This expression reflects the profound spiritual significance attributed to Islamic calligraphy within the

Islamic intellectual and artistic tradition. Far from being a purely decorative art form, calligraphy is understood as a visual manifestation of divine revelation, radiating spiritual beauty while simultaneously conveying theological and metaphysical meanings. In this sense, Islamic calligraphy functions as a medium through which spiritual ideas are communicated, leading ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās to describe it metaphorically as *lisān al-yad* — "the tongue of the hand" — emphasizing that written forms possess the capacity to communicate meanings just as effectively as spoken language (Jabbar, 1981).

Indeed, during the formative period of Islamic civilization, calligraphy extended beyond the realm of aesthetics to acquire profound theological significance. The Kūfic script, for instance, reached its highest stage of refinement by the mid-eighth century CE and became the dominant script for the transcription of Quranic manuscripts. Owing to its formal elegance and authoritative status, *Kūfic* calligraphy was widely accepted as the standard script for writing the Quran and occupied a privileged position within the Islamic artistic tradition (Jabbar, 1981). Its sacred status was further reinforced in popular religious imagination, where some devotional circles regarded the script as possessing a divinely inspired origin, symbolically associating it with the Angel Gabriel, who conveyed the first Quranic revelation to the Prophet Muhammad.

From a broader historical perspective, the development of Islamic calligraphy cannot be separated from the emergence of Islam itself. The first revealed command, *Iqra’* ("Read!"), provided not only the theological foundation for the pursuit of knowledge but also served as a powerful catalyst for the flourishing of written culture throughout the Islamic world. This Quranic imperative stimulated an unprecedented intellectual and artistic transformation, encouraging literacy, manuscript production, and the continuous refinement of Arabic script. As Islamic civilization expanded, the calligraphic tradition evolved into hundreds of script styles and regional variations after centuries of relative stagnation in the history of writing systems. Such remarkable diversification represents one of the most significant achievements in the history of world calligraphy, illustrating how the spiritual imperative of revelation inspired a rich artistic tradition that seamlessly integrated aesthetics, theology, and intellectual culture (Jabbar, 1981).

Within this historical trajectory, Islamic calligraphy emerged as one of the greatest masterpieces of Islamic civilization, admired not only by Muslims but also by non-Muslim scholars, artists, and collectors. The enduring legacy of Islamic calligraphy is evident in its diverse artistic forms, ranging from *al-mashq* (calligraphic exercises and compositions) and religious symbolism to its prominent presence in mosques, palaces,

monuments, and other centers of political and cultural authority (Kuiper, 2010). Many of these works have been carefully preserved and continue to be appreciated for their exceptional aesthetic qualities. In numerous cultural contexts, Islamic calligraphy has also acquired a sacred and, at times, even mystical significance, reflecting its intimate association with the divine word and the spiritual heritage of Islam.

In Indonesia, Islamic calligraphic art began to attract public attention during the late 1960s and gained wider recognition throughout the 1970s. Among the pioneers of modern Indonesian Islamic calligraphy were Ahmad Sadali, A.D. Pirous, Amang Rahman, and Amri Yahya, whose works played a crucial role in introducing calligraphy as a contemporary artistic medium. Their contributions were subsequently continued by a younger generation of artists, including Syaiful Adnan, Hatta Hambali, Hendra Buana, and Abay Subarna, who further expanded the creative possibilities of Islamic calligraphic art. Abay Subarna, in particular, is widely recognized as a pioneer of three-dimensional Islamic calligraphy in Indonesia. Although these artists developed diverse artistic styles and visual approaches, they shared a common aspiration: to express religious and Sufi-inspired aesthetics through innovative forms of calligraphic art. Their works illustrate how Islamic calligraphy has evolved beyond its traditional function as a scriptural art into a dynamic medium that integrates spirituality, artistic creativity, and contemporary visual culture (Kuiper, 2010).

Sufi Movements and the Arts in Indonesia

The arrival of Islam made a profound contribution to the development of the Malay language and literary tradition throughout Southeast Asia. At the same time, the Malay language and its literary heritage played an equally significant role in facilitating the spread of Islam across the Indonesian archipelago and the wider Southeast Asian region. Consistent with its dynamic and transformative character, Islam contributed substantially to the intellectual, cultural, and literary advancement of Malay society. From approximately the fourteenth century onward, Malay gradually evolved into a *lingua franca*, serving as the principal medium of communication among diverse ethnic communities throughout the archipelago, Southeast Asia, and even beyond the region. This historical development greatly enhanced the dissemination of Islamic teachings, particularly through literary, educational, and cultural channels.

The historical significance of Malay as a unifying language is reflected in the observations of Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana (1934–1950), who noted that for centuries the peoples of the archipelago had shared a common language despite their ethnic and

linguistic diversity. According to Alisjahbana, Malay functioned as a bridge connecting communities from Aceh to Batak, Java to Bugis, and Sunda to Lampung, thereby fostering cultural interaction and intellectual exchange across the region. This assessment is reinforced by the testimony of the Dutch traveler Jan Huygen van Linschoten, who, during his visit to the Indonesian archipelago in the late sixteenth century, described Malay as a prestigious and widely respected language among the peoples of the East (Hasjmy, 1990).

Within this historical context, the close relationship between Sufism and the arts became one of the principal channels through which Islam was indigenized in the Indonesian archipelago. Sufi scholars and missionaries employed the Malay language not merely as a means of communication but also as a vehicle for transmitting mystical teachings through poetry, prose, religious narratives, songs, and other forms of literary and artistic expression. Consequently, the spread of Islam in Indonesia was not achieved solely through doctrinal instruction but also through a creative process of cultural adaptation, in which Sufi values were embedded within local artistic traditions. This synthesis between spirituality and culture enabled Islamic teachings to be received in ways that were both intellectually accessible and aesthetically meaningful, thereby contributing to the enduring vitality of Islam in the Indonesian cultural landscape.

The Malay language and literary tradition served as essential media for the dissemination and development of Islam throughout the Indonesian archipelago and the wider Southeast Asian region. The early Muslim missionaries, many of whom were Sufi scholars, propagated Islam through peaceful and culturally adaptive approaches that resonated with local traditions and social values. Rather than rejecting indigenous cultures outright, they sought to integrate Islamic teachings into existing cultural frameworks, thereby facilitating a gradual process of religious and cultural transformation. In this respect, the arrival of Islam introduced both continuity and change in the spheres of arts, culture, and intellectual life. As commonly observed in the historical development of early Islam, the transformation of pre-Islamic Arab culture followed three principal patterns: certain pre-Islamic customs were completely abolished, others were reformed and refined, while entirely new cultural traditions were introduced under the guidance of Islamic teachings.

Historical records indicate that in 173 AH/800 CE a missionary expedition led by the captain (*nakhoda*) Khalifah arrived at the port of Perlak in present-day East Aceh. This delegation, comprising more than one hundred individuals, included scholars distinguished in various branches of Islamic learning, among them Sufi masters and

literary figures. Within a relatively short period, Islam spread throughout the Kingdom of Perlak, where educational institutions were established in numerous settlements. These institutions later developed into *madrasas* and *Zāwiyah Cot Kala*, an advanced center of Islamic learning that played a pivotal role in the intellectual formation of the region. From this educational tradition emerged prominent scholar-missionaries and Sufi figures, including Maulana Ishaq, Maulana Nūr al-Dīn (Fatahillah), Sunan Bonang, and Maulana Abū Bakr, who subsequently contributed to the spread of Islam across Java and the Malay Peninsula (Collins, 2005). Significantly, many of these scholars were not only religious authorities but also accomplished literary figures whose writings and artistic expressions became important vehicles for communicating Islamic and Sufi teachings to diverse local communities.

Motivated by the Islamic imperative to promote literacy as the foundation of knowledge, Muslim scholars played a pivotal role in disseminating Islam through educational initiatives that sought to cultivate reading and writing skills among local communities. This educational mission reflected a broader commitment to intellectual empowerment, enabling both men and women to access religious knowledge and participate in the expanding Islamic scholarly tradition. In this context, Sufi scholars composed numerous religious texts in the Malay language using the Arabic script, while simultaneously producing literary works that combined Islamic teachings with the aesthetic conventions of Malay literature (Collins, 2005).

Prior to the arrival of Islam, the Malay language did not possess a standardized writing system. The spread of Islam led to the development of the Jawi script, an adapted form of the Arabic alphabet designed to accommodate the phonological characteristics of the Malay language. The designation Jawi derives from the historical practice of Arab geographers and merchants, who referred to the Indonesian archipelago as the "Islands of Java" (al-Jāwah). Consequently, Malay texts written in the Arabic script became known as *Kitab Jawi*—or *Kitab Jawoe* in the Acehnese-Malay tradition—and constituted one of the principal vehicles for the transmission of Islamic knowledge throughout Southeast Asia. Likewise, Malay literary compositions, including *pantun*, *syair*, and narrative romances, increasingly adopted Islamic themes while retaining indigenous literary forms. Long narrative poems such as *Syair Siti Asni*, *Syair Putri Bungsu*, and *Syair Aulia Tujuh* exemplify this creative synthesis, illustrating how Sufi spirituality, Islamic education, and Malay literary culture converged to produce a distinctive Islamic literary tradition in the Nusantara (Ellya, 2013).

Even before Malay became the principal literary language of the archipelago, the literary tradition of Aceh had already developed a distinctive Islamic character that would later become closely associated with classical Malay literature. As noted by Arabi Ahmad, the influence of Muslim scholars in Aceh was so profound that many poetic compositions were authored by religious scholars themselves. These literary works functioned not merely as artistic creations but also as educational and religious texts, integrating aesthetic expression with moral instruction and Islamic teachings. Consequently, poetry became an effective medium through which religious knowledge and ethical values were communicated to society.

The prominent role of Sufi scholars as poets and literary intellectuals significantly elevated the status of Islamic literature within both the Malay world and the broader history of world literature. Prominent figures such as Hamzah Fansuri pioneered the integration of Sufi metaphysics with Malay poetic forms, transforming literature into a medium for conveying mystical teachings, ethical values, and spiritual experience. Their writings not only shaped the development of classical Malay literature but also established a distinctive intellectual tradition in which poetry functioned simultaneously as aesthetic expression and religious instruction (Arifka, 2025; Haryadi, 2012; Tuncer, 2021). Characterized by profound spiritual depth, rich symbolism, and refined aesthetic expression, Sufi literature reflects the sanctity of the inner life, the intimate relationship between the human soul and the Divine, and unconditional submission to the will of God. Its poetic language is marked by layered metaphors, intricate symbolism, and multiple levels of meaning that invite contemplative interpretation. At the same time, Sufi literature vividly portrays the paradoxes of the mystical journey, expressing both the suffering and ecstasy experienced by the seeker. In this sense, Sufi poetry embodies a unique synthesis of spiritual complexity and literary beauty, transforming mystical experience into an enduring artistic tradition that continues to enrich Islamic civilization.

Among the most celebrated Sufi literary figures of the Malay world is Shaykh Hamzah Fansuri, who is generally believed to have flourished during the early eleventh century AH (seventeenth century CE). Widely regarded as the foremost Malay Sufi poet, Hamzah Fansuri occupies an unparalleled position in the history of Islamic mystical literature. One of his best-known works is the *Rubā'ī*, which exemplifies his profound engagement with Sufi metaphysics and poetic symbolism (Dahlan, 2014). More broadly, four Malay Sufi scholars achieved enduring international recognition for their literary and intellectual contributions: Shaykh Hamzah Fansuri, credited with four major works; Shaykh Shams al-Dīn al-Sumatrānī,

who authored approximately sixteen works; Shaykh Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī, whose corpus comprises around twenty-seven writings; and Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf al-Singkel (Syiah Kuala), who is believed to have produced nine significant works (Muthari, 1995). Collectively, these scholars established the intellectual foundations of Malay-Islamic literature by integrating Sufi theology, philosophy, and spirituality into sophisticated literary forms.

A similar synthesis of Sufism and artistic expression can be observed in the cultural legacy of the Walisongo, the nine revered saints who played a decisive role in the Islamization of Java. Rather than relying solely on doctrinal instruction, the Walisongo adopted an accommodative strategy by integrating Islamic teachings with local artistic traditions, including *tembang*, gamelan, wayang, and other forms of Javanese performance. Through these cultural media, mystical and ethical dimensions of Sufism were communicated in forms that resonated with indigenous society, allowing Islamic values to be internalized without disrupting existing cultural identities (Bakri, 2019; Junaidi, 2013; Maziyah & Amaruli, 2020; Ulfah, 2013). As noted by Umar Hasyim, many classical Javanese *tembang* genres are traditionally attributed to the Walisongo (Sunyoto, 2017). Sunan Giri is credited with composing the mystical *tembang* Asmaradana and Pucung; Sunan Kalijaga with Dhandhanggula and Dhandhanggula Semarang; Sunan Bonang with mystical compositions in the Darma tradition; Sunan Kudus with Maskumambang and Mijil; Sunan Muria with Sinom and Kinanthi; and Sunan Drajat with Pangkur (Hasjmy, 1990). These musical compositions illustrate how Sufi spirituality was creatively embedded within local artistic traditions, enabling Islamic teachings to be communicated through culturally familiar aesthetic forms. Consequently, the Walisongo exemplify the enduring relationship between Sufism, literature, music, and cultural adaptation in the historical development of Islam in Indonesia.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that the relationship between Sufism and the arts in the contemporary era can be understood through two complementary dimensions: the esoteric and the exoteric. The esoteric dimension positions the arts as an integral component of the spiritual disciplines practiced by Sufis, particularly within Sufi orders (*ṭuruq*). In this context, artistic expressions such as music, poetry, calligraphy, and, in certain traditions, sacred dance function as spiritual media that facilitate inner purification, contemplation, and the cultivation of mystical consciousness. The legitimacy and implementation of these artistic practices are

generally subject to the authority of the *murshid* (spiritual guide), who determines their appropriate use within the framework of Sufi ritual and spiritual training. Nevertheless, classical and contemporary Sufi traditions do not hold a uniform position regarding the role of the arts, especially music and dance, resulting in a continuing diversity of theological and juridical perspectives.

The exoteric dimension, by contrast, highlights the strategic role of the arts as a medium for disseminating Sufi teachings and communicating Islamic values to the wider public. Throughout Islamic history, Sufi scholars have employed literature, poetry, music, calligraphy, architecture, and local artistic traditions as culturally accessible instruments of *da'wah*. The Islamization of the Indonesian archipelago provides a compelling illustration of this dynamic, as Sufi missionaries successfully integrated Islamic teachings with indigenous cultural expressions without negating local traditions. This historical experience demonstrates that Sufism possesses a remarkable capacity for cultural accommodation and creative engagement, enabling it to interact constructively with diverse civilizations, artistic traditions, and religious cultures. Consequently, the relationship between Sufism and the arts should be understood not merely as an aesthetic phenomenon but as a multidimensional process Jabbar through which spirituality is embodied, transmitted, and continually reinterpreted within changing social and cultural contexts. This study therefore contributes to contemporary Sufism scholarship by offering a conceptual framework that situates the arts as both a medium of spiritual formation and an instrument of cultural transformation in the modern world.

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