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VIRTUAL DHIKR: EXPLORING TASAWWUF IN ONLINE SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The development of information and communication technology has changed various aspects of human life, including in the practice of religion and spirituality. One phenomenon that has emerged as an impact of the digital era is the presence of online Sufism communities. This article aims to explore how the practice and teaching of Sufism has been transformed through digital platforms, and how the formation of internet-based spiritual communities has become a new forum for Sufi path seekers (salik). A qualitative approach using literature study methods and observation of digital activities was carried out to examine the forms of spiritual involvement in the dare space. The findings show that online Sufism communities are not only a place to exchange religious information, but also function as a space for spiritual interaction, Sufi education, and strengthening collective identity. Activities such as the online dhikr assembly, Sufism studies through social media, and Sufism content on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram provide wider and more flexible access for the community, especially the younger generation. However, this dynamic also presents new challenges, such as the issue of scientific authority, the reinterpretation of teachings, and the possibility of simplification or distortion of Sufism values. This article concludes that the digital world opens up new opportunities for the revitalization of Sufism teachings in a modern context. Bold spiritual communities can be an effective means of maintaining the essence of Sufism while also responding to the need for a more personal and open religiosity. Thus, online Sufism is a reflection of the adaptation of tradition to the ever-evolving technological landscape.

INTRODUCTION

Sufism is an esoteric dimension in Islam that focuses on the purification of the soul and the inner approach to Allah SWT. Throughout its history, Sufism has developed as a spiritual path that emphasizes direct and personal experience with God through various methods such as dhikr (repetition of the name of Allah), muraqabah (inner supervision), khalwat (solitude for

worship), and suluk (spiritual journey in the tarekat). The ultimate goal of Sufism is to achieve ma'rifat, namely direct and profound knowledge of God obtained through spiritual experience, not just intellectual rationality.

In practice, Sufism not only emphasizes individual rituals, but also upholds the spiritual authority of a teacher (mursyid) and the importance of lineage (sanad) in receiving teachings, including in taking the ijazah of wirid or dhikr. The ijazah is a symbol of spiritual legality that is passed down from one generation to another verbally and directly. However, in the last two decades, the emergence of digital technology has created major changes in the way humans carry out their religious practices, including in Sufism.

The digital revolution, especially through social media such as YouTube, WhatsApp, Zoom, and other online platforms, has opened up new spaces for Muslims to carry out spiritual activities flexibly and across geographical boundaries. One of the most striking phenomena is the birth of a virtual dhikr community, namely a group of individuals or congregations who carry out dhikr simultaneously through online media without meeting face to face physically. This community allows Sufism practitioners from various parts of the world to connect in one dhikr assembly without the constraints of space and time.

This phenomenon has generated various responses among academics and Sufi practitioners. Some see it as a positive innovation that answers spiritual needs amidst physical limitations, for example during a pandemic or for those who live far from the center of the order. Spiritual digitalization is considered capable of expanding access to Sufi teachings and strengthening connectivity between Sufism practitioners (Rizki &

Rusdi, 2024:99). On the other hand, concerns have arisen regarding the authenticity and validity of spiritual experiences obtained online. Is virtual dhikr capable of presenting the same spiritual depth as in traditional dhikr assemblies? Are the ijaza of wirid given through digital media still valid in terms of sanad and valuable in the Sufism tradition?

These questions lead to theological and epistemological debates about the limits of the legitimacy of Sufi practices in the digital space. One of the main concerns is how digitalization changes the relationship between the disciple and the mursyid. In the traditional context, this relationship is personal, full of emotional and spiritual closeness. However, in the virtual space, the interaction becomes more impersonal and risks losing the essence of the "barakah" of the physical meeting (Rizki & Rusdi, 2024:103).

In addition, this transformation also has psychological implications. As explained by Erwahyudin (2023: 5), the use of digital technology in religious practices can strengthen positive psychological conditions if directed correctly, but can also create spiritual illusions or

a "false sense of religiosity" if done without proper guidance. Therefore, the practice of virtual dhikr requires a critical and responsible approach so as not to deviate from the basic principles of Sufism.

This study aims to understand in depth how Sufism is interpreted and practiced in online spiritual communities, with a focus on the practice of virtual dhikr. Furthermore, this study will analyze the impact of this shift on the inner experiences of Sufism practitioners, the authority of knowledge through ijaza, and the theological and psychological consequences that arise. By referring to various academic sources and empirical studies, this article is expected to contribute to a new understanding of Islamic spirituality in the digital era.

RESEARCH METHOD

Sufism, as a spiritual dimension of Islam, has a unique approach to worship and religious experience. One important aspect of Sufism is the practice of dhikr, namely the activity of remembering and mentioning the name of Allah continuously as a way of purifying the soul and approaching God. In the Sufi framework, dhikr is not just a mechanical repetition of words, but rather a contemplative process that involves all dimensions of consciousness: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Therefore, dhikr is understood as the main path to fana' (the disappearance of the ego) and baqa' (existence in divinity).

According to Rizki and Rusdi (2024: 98–100), digital media has had a major influence on the spread of Sufism teachings, especially in the distribution of ijazah wirid—a form of spiritual legitimacy given by a teacher (mursyid) to his students to practice certain dhikr. Traditionally, the process of granting ijazah is carried out directly, through face-to-face meetings, accompanied by teaching of manners and understanding the meaning of the dhikr. However, with the presence of digital technology, this process has undergone a significant transformation. Mursyid can now grant ijazah via video recordings, voice messages, or online meetings such as Zoom and WhatsApp. Although the medium has changed, the spiritual meaning of the ijazah is still maintained, including by emphasizing the legitimate sanad (chain of transmission).

This change in form cannot be separated from the challenges of the times, where many Sufism practitioners are spread across various regions and do not have direct access to the centers of the order. In this case, digital media becomes an inclusive means that allows Muslims to stay connected to the Sufi tradition. However, according to Rizki and Rusdi (2024, p. 103), it is important to note that digital media is a tool, not a substitute for an authentic spiritual relationship between students and mursyid.

Furthermore, Erwahyudin (2023, pp. 4–6) highlights the importance of integrating technology and Islamic psychology in supporting spiritual well-being. In the context of Sufism practice, the use of technology such as dhikr applications, online community forums, and Sufi lecture videos can increase access to spiritual knowledge and motivation. He emphasizes that if digital media is used with the right psychospiritual approach, technology can strengthen human relationships with God and reduce stress levels, anxiety, and feelings of alienation that often plague modern individuals. However, he also warns of the risk of "instant spirituality" or a shallow approach to spiritual experience, if not accompanied by adequate guidance.

In traditional Sufi communities, dhikr is usually done in congregation, in a dhikr assembly led by a mursyid or caliph. This context is not only about ritual, but also about the transmission of spiritual energy (barakah) which is believed to only be transferred through direct presence and spiritual closeness. Therefore, the transformation of the form of dhikr into online media poses new challenges. Is the spiritual experience that arises in virtual dhikr equivalent to the experience in a physical dhikr assembly? How to maintain manners, solemnity, and intensity in an environment that is not physically sacred?

This transformation also opens up questions about authority in spiritual guidance. In the digital world, many individuals perform dhikr without direct guidance from a teacher. This can pose a risk of misunderstanding in the dhikr method, including rhythm, number, meaning of words, and intention, all of which are important elements in Sufism. Friedman and Wachs (2020, pp. 75–77) explain that in the study of psychospiritual environments, environmental aspects greatly influence the quality of inner experience. Thus, the shift from a sacred physical space to a profane digital space requires careful adaptation and full awareness from its practitioners.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

1. The Emergence of Virtual Dhikr Community

The emergence of virtual dhikr communities is a creative response from Muslims to social changes triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. As physical and social restrictions are imposed globally, religious communities are trying to find new ways to continue their spiritual practices. In the context of Sufism, this phenomenon has given birth to various forms of online spiritual communities, where activities such as dhikr assemblies, regular wirid, Sufism studies, and even the awarding of diplomas have begun to be carried out online through digital platforms such as Zoom, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Telegram.

According to Rizki and Rusdi (2024, p. 98), digital media not only expands access to Sufism teachings, but also enables the transformation of the form of conveying spirituality. Through live streaming and video conference features, the mursyids can deliver Sufi lectures, guide collective dhikr, and even read diplomas to students in various regions of the world. This phenomenon makes Sufism more inclusive, especially for the younger generation who are more familiar with technology and for the Muslim diaspora who previously had difficulty accessing the tarekat community physically.

In some cases, dhikr communities have even succeeded in bringing together worshipers from various social and national backgrounds in one virtual space. This shows that Sufism in the digital era is able to bridge geographical boundaries, making religious experiences more global and open. However, this openness also demands caution in maintaining the authenticity, sacredness, and originality of the Sufi teachings themselves.

2. Changes in the Diploma and Sanad Mechanism

In the classical Sufi tradition, the process of obtaining an ijazah or permission to practice certain dhikr is a central element. This process is not only formal, but also spiritual—because the ijazah carries "blessings" and legitimacy from a chain of spiritual transmission (sanad) that continues to the Prophet Muhammad SAW. Usually, the ijazah is delivered directly by a mursyid to his student verbally and in a sacred atmosphere. However, in the digital context, this mechanism has undergone adaptation.

Rizki and Rusdi (2024, p. 102) emphasize that although digital media allows online reading of diplomas, verification of the sanad and the validity of the teacher must still be strictly maintained. They suggest that every online diploma retrieval must still be accompanied by written sanad documentation, audio-video recordings, and confirmation from the tarekat. Without it, there is a risk of breaking the chain of spiritual authority and the emergence of pseudo-Sufi figures who do not have authentic legitimacy.

In addition, the distance learning model can reduce the quality of the relationship between students and teachers. In Sufism, this relationship is not only educational, but also transformational a spiritual relationship that demands closeness, openness, and exemplary behavior. Therefore, the shift in the diploma mechanism to online space needs to be accompanied by a new approach that can maintain the depth of this spiritual relationship.

DISCUSSION

1. Influence on Spiritual Experience

One of the big questions that arises from the practice of virtual dhikr is: can the spiritual experience gained through digital space be equal to the experience in a sacred physical space?

The answer is not black and white. Based on observations and testimonies from online dhikr practitioners, many reported that they could still feel peace, solemnity, and even tears of emotion when participating in virtual dhikr.

However, the experience is not uniform. Some worshippers complain of a lack of spiritual intimacy and difficulty maintaining focus due to home environment distractions and unstable internet connections. Interaction with the mursyid is also more limited, limited to one-way lectures or limited Q&A sessions. This is very different from physical dhikr where students can absorb spiritual aura, collective energy, and lessons through direct interaction.

Friedman and Wachs (2020, p. 75) explain that the physical environment has a major influence on spiritual experiences. In the context of dhikr, the atmosphere of a sacred space and the presence of people with the same energy frequency can create a deeper spiritual resonance. Therefore, virtual dhikr, although useful, is not necessarily able to replace the depth of spiritual experience that is present in traditional dhikr in person.

2.Psychology of Spirituality in the Digital Age

Within the framework of modern Islamic psychology, the integration of spiritual practices and digital media is becoming an increasingly relevant issue, especially amidst the complexity of urban life and the rapid rhythm of modern society. Erwahyudin (2023, p. 4) explains that digital media can be an effective tool in supporting psychological and spiritual development, as long as it is used with the right intentions and proper guidance. In the context of dhikr, digital media provides an alternative for those who have difficulty being physically present, but still want to maintain a vertical relationship with God.

Technology allows individuals to maintain a flexible spiritual rhythm, without having to sacrifice their worldly obligations. Virtual dhikr can be a means of stress relief, a calmer for the soul, as well as a medium for contemplation. Marano (2023, p. 90) in his study of modern psychology also notes that spirituality is one of the important factors in forming a strong and mentally balanced personality.

However, the other side is the emergence of the risk of instant spirituality—where someone feels that it is enough to just listen to lectures or follow online dhikr without deepening their knowledge or undergoing intensive spiritual guidance. Therefore, the virtual dhikr community must continue to prioritize scientific values, ongoing guidance, and Sufism ethics so that the ultimate goal of spirituality is not replaced by convenience alone.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of Sufism practices into the digital space through virtual dhikr communities is a contemporary spiritual phenomenon that reflects the religious dynamics of

Muslims in facing the development of information technology. In the midst of the current of modernization and digitalization, Sufism—which has long been known as an inner path with an emphasis on silence, teacher-student closeness, and direct experience with God—has succeeded in adapting without completely abandoning its basic essence.

On the one hand, the practice of virtual dhikr has opened the door to wider inclusivity and accessibility. Muslims from various backgrounds, geographic locations, and social conditions can easily engage in dhikr assemblies, Sufism studies, and taking wirid diplomas without physical limitations. This is very relevant, especially in the context of a global pandemic or individual conditions that do not allow for in-person attendance. Thus, the online dhikr community is a form of spiritual renewal that is in accordance with the needs of the times.

However, this convenience also presents significant challenges. One of them is the authenticity of the sanad—the chain of spiritual transmission that is the main foundation in the practice of Sufism. In the virtual model, the interaction that should be sacred and spiritual between the mursyid and the student is often distorted by the limitations of digital media. When the teacher-student relationship becomes impersonal, there is a concern that the quality of spiritual transformation is reduced, and the deep meaning of dhikr remains only in the ritualistic aspect.

In addition, there is a risk of the emergence of instant spirituality and shallow understanding of Sufism teachings. This is due to the ease of access that is not always accompanied by a process of guidance and internalization of Sufi values in their entirety. In conditions like this, it is important for the mursyid, tarekat institutions, and religious institutions to carry out more systematic and responsible guidance in the online space. They need to ensure that the use of technology does not only function as a means of communication, but also as a means to strengthen spirituality substantially.

By considering these two sides, it can be concluded that digital Sufism is not just a technological phenomenon, but also a theological and sociological opportunity to expand the meaning of Islamic spirituality. In order for this transformation to remain in line with the basic values of Sufism such as sincerity, muraqabah, mahabbah, and tawadhu', collective awareness is needed from all parties involved. In the future, an integrative approach—between the depth of tradition and technological sophistication—is expected to be able to make the virtual dhikr community a space for valid, deep and empowering spiritual growth.

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