

# Field Studies on Sufi Practices in Kudus, Central Java

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Indonesia

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## **Research Background**

In Indonesia, there is a deeply rooted belief that the nine Islamic Sufi saints (called Wali Songo in Indonesian) played a significant role in the spread of Islam in Indonesia. This signifies that Sufism has been widely accepted among Indonesian Muslim society. The Islamic traditionalist Islamic group, Nahdhatul Ulama (NU), is on an ongoing mission to keep Sufism at the core of Islamic belief and practices. NU's long history in the development and spread of Islam in Indonesia ensures that it has a significant influence on Indonesian Muslims, particularly in the Java region. Nahdhatul Ulama is also known as the "seat belt of Indonesian Islamic life" since its moderate understanding of Islam protects society from Islamic radical movements.

## **Research Purpose and Aim**

Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim-dominated nation state, with Muslims accounting for 88% (approximately 230 million) of its population. Sufism contributes to the existence of moderate Islamic thought in Indonesia. The country enjoys religious freedom and accepts moderate Islam due to Sufism's spiritual essence. This study aims to research Indonesian Sufi thought and practices to discover a rich culture of Islamic spirituality that nourishes the religious lives of Muslims in Indonesia.

## **Results and Achievements of Fieldwork**

I chose a small town in Central Java called Kudus as this was one of the places where Islam was first accepted in Indonesian history. Kudus has a rich culture of Sufism influenced by the two Wali Songo that resided in the region and spread the teaching of Sufism. As part of this fieldwork, I visited the tombs of both these Wali Songo and conducted research on visitors practicing religious activities, interviewed teachers at pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) and Habibs who are believed to be descendants of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, and collected Islamic textbooks from

pesantren and local Islamic bookstores.

First, I visited the tomb of Sunan Kudus. His tomb is located next to Al-Aqsa mosque in the western part of Kudus. In front of his mausoleum there are many visitors reciting the Quran, praying for the soul of the Sunan, and even for asking divine blessings. Another tomb, that of Sunan Muria, is located in the Mount Muria area. The strong influence of Sunan Muria is shown by the lively religious as well as economic activity around the tomb, that is, the locals run shops selling Islamic goods such as pictures of Habibs or copies of the Quran.

Second, I visited several pesantren in Kudus where I was able to observe student practices such as Manakiban (the reading of certain literature that focuses on the lives and the work of Islamic Saints) and Tahlilan (the recitation of certain literature that aims to praise God and the prophet), which are strong traditions followed by the NU community. These practices involve reciting Islamic refrains mostly about Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, the founder of the Sufi brotherhood called al-Tariqa al-Qadiriya.

### **Implications and Impacts on Future Research**

Through this fieldwork, I discovered the spirit of Sufism and its rich culture still exists among the Muslim people in Kudus. This time, I used Bahasa Indonesia and Arabic for research; however, Kudus citizens use Javanese in their daily lives. In order to continue further study, learning Javanese is essential. Studying Javanese will also benefit me, because this means that I will have the capability to read some more old scriptures written in the Jawi language. In the future, I would like to continue to study how the Indonesian people interpret, absorb, and develop Islamic knowledge through reading of Islamic texts and interviews with Muslims living in Kudus.

Pictures of Wali Songo (nine Sufi saints)





Tomb of Sunan Kudus and Masjid Aqsa in Kudus



Interview with Habib Lutfi at Pekalongan