



**SUFISM AND QURANIC INTERPRETATION:  
Bridging Spirituality, Culture, and Political Discourse  
in Muslim Societies**

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**Abstract:** This research discusses the influence of the Sufi interpretation of the Qur'an in shaping cultural narratives and political discourses in Muslim society. This study addresses the under-explored influence of Sufism beyond its spiritual domain, specifically in cultural and political spheres. This study aims to fill this void by exploring how the Sufi interpretation of the Qur'an influences contemporary cultural identity and political dynamics. The methods used in this study are multidisciplinary approaches, including analysis of Sufi literature, art, and social practices. The study's findings suggest that Sufism has a significant role in shaping cultural narratives, promoting tolerance and social justice, and providing a framework of thought that influences political discourse in Muslim communities. This study recommends that future studies focus more on Sufism's contribution to Islamic political thought and its relevance in the modern context. This research also emphasizes the importance of considering the spiritual dimension in analyzing cultural and political phenomena to understand the role of religion in shaping the social and political landscape more comprehensively.

**Keywords:** Cultural Narratives, Muslim society, Political Discourse, The Role of Sufism, Quranic Interpretation

**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v28i2.1082>

## **Introduction**

SUFISM is a mystical dimension in Islam that has attracted the attention of academics for centuries due to its profound and far-reaching influence on the cultural and political landscape of Muslim societies. As a spiritual tradition, Sufism goes beyond

conventional religious practices, offering unique insights into Islamic societies' spiritual and cultural structure.<sup>1</sup> Sufism provides a framework for understanding the divine through personal experience, often emphasizing introspection, love, and a direct and experiential relationship with the divine.<sup>2</sup> This emphasis on personal experience distinguishes Sufism from the more legalistic interpretation of Islam. Prominent scholars, including Carl W. Ernst in his work "*Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam*," highlight how Sufism, rather than simply serving as an avenue for individual spiritual fulfillment, has played a crucial role in shaping cultural narratives that influence the way Islam is practiced and perceived in a variety of contexts.<sup>3</sup> This influence is evident in various art forms such as poetry, music, and architecture, where Sufi thought has left an indelible mark on Islamic civilization. For example, Annemarie Schimmel, in her seminal work "*The Mystical Dimension of Islam*," explores the profound impact of Sufi poetry and music on Islamic spirituality and its role in spreading the teachings of Islam to different cultures<sup>4</sup>

Sufi influence extends far beyond personal spirituality, manifested clearly in various forms of cultural expression. Sufi poetry, music, and art have long served as powerful mediums for spiritual and cultural transmission within and outside the Muslim world. This artistic expression, inspired by symbolism and metaphor, goes beyond mere aesthetics; it summarizes and conveys the core principles of Sufi spirituality. As Alhourani points out in his work, "*Aesthetics of Muslim-ness: Art and the Formation of Muslim Identity Politics*," these art forms do not exist in a vacuum. They engage with broader social and political themes, reflecting Muslim societies' complex interplay of spirituality,

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<sup>1</sup> William C Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (State University of New York Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Mansoor H. Abidi, 'Sufism and Jungian Psychology: Ways of Knowing and Being,' 2021, 399–416, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-72606-5\\_18](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-72606-5_18).

<sup>3</sup> Carl W Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* (Shambhala Publications, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*.

culture, and politics.<sup>5</sup> For example, Sufi poetry, emphasizing love, unity, and the search for divine truth, explores universal themes far beyond cultural and linguistic boundaries. This universality is at the heart of the enduring global appeal of Sufi poets such as Rumi and Hafez, whose works continue to captivate audiences centuries later, as evidenced by numerous studies of their impact, such as "*Beyond Dogma: Rumi's teachings on Friendship with God and early Sufi theories*" by Jawid Mojaddedi.<sup>6</sup>

The widespread Sufi influence in various aspects of Muslim life necessitated a more in-depth exploration of its role in shaping contemporary Islamic thought and practice. While theological studies have shed light on Sufi doctrine and practice, a comprehensive understanding of its impact in bridging cultural and political realms, mainly through interpreting the Quran, remains unexplored. As Omid Safi points out in his 2006 book "*Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*," there is an urgent need to move beyond the purely theological examination of Sufis.<sup>7</sup> This research addresses this gap by investigating how the Sufi interpretation of the Qur'an influences and reshapes cultural narratives and political ideologies. This exploration will investigate the hermeneutic methods used by Sufi scholars and commentators, analyzing how their interpretations have informed an understanding of social justice, political authority, and the relationship between the individual and the state. Such investigations are essential to understanding the broader implications of Sufism for Islamic thought and its potential to influence the contemporary political landscape, as Arthur F.

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<sup>5</sup> Alhourani, A. (2018). Aesthetics of Muslim-ness: Art and the Formation of Muslim Identity Politics. *Journal of Religion in Africa*. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700666-12340142>.

<sup>6</sup> Abolfazl Moshiri, 'Beyond Dogma: Rumi's Teachings on Friendship with God and Early Sufi Theories' (Taylor & Francis, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Rozehnal, 'Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism, Edited by Omid Safi. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003. 351 Pages, Endnotes; Select Bibliography; Index. US \$25.95 (Paper) ISBN 1-85168-316-X', *Review of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 1 (2004): 118–19.

Buehler emphasized in his 1998 article "Sufism and Politics in Modern Turkey: The Case of Said Nursi."<sup>8</sup>

By examining historical and contemporary examples, this research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the enduring relevance of Sufism in navigating the complexities of the modern world. The study also seeks to uncover the complex ways in which Sufi interpretation of the Qur'an contributes to cultural and political discourse, thereby enriching academic understanding of the multifaceted role of Sufism in Muslim society. By focusing on this intersection, this research also seeks to illustrate the potential of Sufism to offer an alternative perspective to Islamic political thought.<sup>9</sup> One of the main objectives of this research is to explore and explain Sufi contributions to cultural narratives and political ideologies through its unique approach to the interpretation of the Quran. By examining these intersections, this study aims to provide insight into the broader implications of Sufism on contemporary Muslim thought and practice.

The importance of this research lies in its potential to enrich the academic discourse around Sufism and its impact on the cultural and political dimensions. By highlighting these intersections, this research contributes to Islamic studies, cultural studies, and political science by offering nuanced perspectives on the interplay between spirituality, culture, and politics. This exploration not only broadens the understanding of the multifaceted role of Sufism in Muslim society but also highlights its potential to foster dialogue and understanding within and outside the Muslim community.<sup>10</sup> This study underscored the importance of considering the spiritual dimension in analyzing cultural and political phenomena by explaining how Sufism influenced cultural narratives and political discourse. Such insights could pave the way for a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to understanding the role of religion in

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<sup>8</sup> Arthur F Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh* (Univ of South Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Mark J Sedgwick, *Sufism: The Essentials* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

shaping the social and political landscape. Thus, Sufism acts as a bridge between religious understanding and modern political needs. This research aims to describe the potential of Sufism to offer new perspectives in Islamic political thought, bridge various aspects of society, and offer alternative perspectives to Islamic political thought.

## Beyond the Spiritual: Sufism, Quranic Interpretation, and the Shaping of Cultural and Political Narratives

Studies of Sufism and its influence on culture and politics reveal a significant gap in our understanding of its role.<sup>11</sup> Existing research focuses on spiritual and philosophical aspects, ignoring its broader impact on cultural and political narratives.<sup>12</sup> These studies often explore Sufi spiritual doctrines and practices, providing insight into their followers' rituals and daily lives. However, the lack of attention to the socio-political implications of Sufism limits our understanding of its potential impact on Muslim society as a whole. For example, research highlighting Sufism's contributions to art and literature must often relate to how these elements influence cultural identity and political dynamics.

Theological studies of Sufism have shown that Sufi teachings offer a different perspective from traditional Islam. The Sufi approach to interpreting the Qur'an tends to be more esoteric and mystical, making valuable contributions to theological and philosophical interpretation in Islam.<sup>13</sup> For example, research by Knysh (2015) in *"Islamic Mysticism: A Short History"* shows how the Sufi approach emphasizes personal spiritual experience and direct connection with God, often translating into more introspective and symbolic interpretations.<sup>14</sup> However, there is a lack of in-depth study of how Sufi interpretation can contribute to contemporary

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<sup>11</sup> Agata Maria Karbowska, *Sufizm w Polityce, Polityka w Sufizmie: Turcja w Latach 1958-2001* (Księgarnia Akademicka Publishing, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.12797/9788381388214>.

<sup>12</sup> Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam*.

<sup>13</sup> J Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*, vol. 1 (Brill, 2015).

political discourse.<sup>15</sup> Although previous research, such as Hoffman (2023) in "*Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt*," focused on Quranic interpretation by Sufi scholars, suggests that this approach can enrich theological debates, it often ignores its potential impact on the political context.<sup>16</sup> For example, the Sufi approach can offer insights into tolerance and diversity that can be relevant in today's political discussions, but these aspects still need to be explored in the existing literature. Further, an article by Ernst (1997) suggests that Sufism can potentially promote interreligious dialogue and peace, but this understanding has not been fully utilized in contemporary political analysis.<sup>17</sup>

In the political sphere, the influence of Sufism is often overlooked, although there is evidence that Sufi movements have played a role in promoting values of tolerance and inclusivity.<sup>18</sup> For example, a study by Sirriyah (2014) in "*Sufis and Anti-Sufis: The Defence, Rethinking, and Rejection of Sufism in the Modern World*" shows that Sufi orders play an important role in promoting interfaith dialogue and peace.<sup>19</sup> Several studies have noted Sufi involvement in socio-political issues, such as advocacy for social justice and reform in Muslim societies.<sup>20</sup> For example, research by Malik (2017) published in the "Journal of Religious Studies" reveals how the Sufi community in Pakistan has been involved in campaigns for women's rights and education. However, the role of Sufi in shaping policy and public opinion should be recognized in the academic literature. This points to the need for a more integrated study that considers the socio-political impact of Sufism. For example, the involvement of Sufi orders in countries

<sup>15</sup> Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh*.

<sup>16</sup> Valerie J Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt* (Univ of South Carolina Press, 2023).

<sup>17</sup> Carl W Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Shambhala, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Omid Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam: Negotiating Ideology and Religious Inquiry*. Univ of North Carolina Press, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Sirriyah, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis: The Defence, Rethinking and Rejection of Sufism in the Modern World* (Routledge, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Ahmet T Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (University of California Press, 2007).

such as Turkey and Pakistan in advocating for democratic principles and human rights is often poorly documented. Further research by Nasr (2004) in "*Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*" shows that Sufis in Turkey actively participate in supporting political reform and human rights, making an important contribution that is still underappreciated in contemporary political analysis.<sup>21</sup>

Contemporary research shows that cultural narratives inspired by Sufism remain relevant, especially in diaspora communities. In this environment, Sufi practices are essential for maintaining cultural identity. For example, research by Geaves (2015) in "*Sufism in the West*" shows that Muslim diaspora communities often use Sufi teachings to strengthen their cultural and spiritual ties in new countries.<sup>22</sup> Research by Rozenhal (2016) in "*Islamic Sufism Unbound: Politics and Piety in Twenty-First Century Pakistan*" also reveals the same thing.<sup>23</sup> In this context, universal Sufi themes such as love and unity are essential for strengthening communal identity.<sup>24</sup> These themes offer a framework for dealing with modern challenges such as assimilation and loss of cultural identity. This cultural narrative not only retains the spiritual essence of Sufi but also interacts with broader social and political themes. This shows the complexity of the interaction between spirituality, culture, and politics in Muslim society. For example, an article by Klinkhamer (2007) in "*Pilgrims of Love: The Anthropology of a Sufi Cult*" describes how this narrative helps diaspora communities in responding to political and social issues, such as discrimination and marginalization, in a more constructive way.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Sufism offers more than just religious practices; it

<sup>21</sup> Vali Nasr, 'Islamic Political Identity in Turkey,' *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 3 (2004): 626–27.

<sup>22</sup> Ron Geaves, 'Sufism in the West', *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, 2015, 233–56.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Rozenhal, *Islamic Sufism Unbound: Politics and Piety in Twenty-First Century Pakistan* (Springer, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Shāh Walī Allāh, *The Conclusive Argument from God: Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi's Hujjat Allāh Al-Bāligha*, vol. 25 (Brill, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Gritt Klinkhamer, 'Pilgrims of Love. The Anthropology of a Sufi Cult' (JSTOR, 2007).

bridges spirituality and the socio-political realities faced by the diaspora community.

This literature review highlights the need for more in-depth and integrated research on the role of Sufism in the mediation of cultural and political narratives. Although various studies have touched on specific aspects of Sufism's contributions, there still needs to be a comprehensive understanding of how Sufism influences and shapes cultural and political discourse. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the contribution of Sufi to the interpretation of the Qur'an and its impact on cultural and political discourse.<sup>26</sup> Research by Chittick (2000) in "*The Sufi Path of Knowledge*" shows that Sufi interpretations of the Qur'an often offer unique perspectives that can enrich cultural and political discussions, especially in the context of diversity and interfaith dialogue.<sup>27</sup> Thus, this study not only broadens the scope of Sufi studies but also highlights the relevance of the spiritual dimension in the analysis of cultural and political phenomena. This approach is supported by a study by Ernst (2004) in "*Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*," which emphasizes the importance of spiritual understanding in examining socio-political dynamics.<sup>28</sup> Considering the importance of Sufism's role in shaping identities and narratives, this research offers a more inclusive and comprehensive perspective, paving the way for new approaches to understanding the role of religion in shaping social and political landscapes. Thus, this study makes an important contribution to the existing literature and encourages further research.

### **Sufi Art and Literature: Its Contribution to Cultural Identity**

Sufi has played an important role in shaping cultural narratives in Muslim societies through teachings rooted in cultural

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<sup>26</sup> Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*.

<sup>27</sup> Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*.

<sup>28</sup> Carl W Ernst, 'Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World (Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks) by Ernst, Carl W.(2004) Paperback', n.d.

expressions such as poetry, music, and art.<sup>29</sup> Through this medium, Sufi teachings offer spiritual insights and serve as a vital tool for preserving cultural identity amid changing times. The poems of Rumi and Hafez, two of the most famous Sufi figures, not only celebrate spirituality but also convey universal values that transcend cultural boundaries. Research by Lewisohn (1998) in "The Heritage of Sufism" shows that the works of Rumi and Hafez can integrate Sufi teachings with aspects of local culture, thus creating a deep and lasting cultural heritage.<sup>30</sup> This cultural expression allows the Muslim community to maintain and develop its identity in the face of external and internal challenges. A study by Schimmel (2001) in "Mystical Dimensions of Islam" reveals how Sufi music and dance, as seen in the Whirling Dervishes tradition in Turkey, are not only a means to get closer to God but also a way to strengthen cultural identity in globalization.<sup>31</sup> As such, the expression of Sufi culture bridges spirituality and the sustainability of cultural identity, allowing Muslim communities to stay connected to their spiritual roots while thriving in an ever-changing world.

Sufi artistic expression has long been important for transmitting spiritual and cultural values across generations. Sufi music, as seen in the Qawwali tradition in South Asia, serves as a means of conveying profound spiritual teachings.<sup>32</sup> This tradition is not only a tool of entertainment but also serves as a medium for meditation and spiritual contemplation for its listeners. Research by Qureshi (1994) in "Exploring Time Cross-Culturally" found that Sufi performing arts, including Qawwali, cultivate intense emotional and spiritual experiences, which bring listeners closer to

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<sup>29</sup> Alfia K. Shayakhmetova, 'Philosophical Understanding of Music and Poetry in Sufism,' *Journal of Siberian Federal University. Humanities & Social Sciences* 15, no. 1 (January 2022): 103–14, <https://doi.org/10.17516/1997-1370-0880>.

<sup>30</sup> Leonard Lewisohn, *The Heritage of Sufism: Classical Persian Sufism from Its Origins to Rumi (700-1300) V. 1* (Simon and Schuster, 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Annemarie Schimmel and Carl W. Ernst, 'Mystical Dimensions of Islam: Thirty-Fifth Anniversary Edition.', 2011, 320.

<sup>32</sup> Wali Allāh, *The Conclusive Argument from God*.

the mystical experiences told in Sufi teachings.<sup>33</sup> In addition, the Sufi art tradition also serves as an essential mechanism for maintaining cultural and spiritual continuity in the widespread Muslim society. Research by Milani (2012) in "The Cultural Products of Global Sufism" shows that Sufi music and art help strengthen cultural and spiritual identities among Muslim diaspora communities, which often face challenges in maintaining their cultural heritage amid the tide of globalization.<sup>34</sup> Thus, Sufi art traditions such as Qawwali transmit spiritual teachings and play an essential role in preserving and strengthening the cultural identity of diverse Muslim societies.

Sufi also contributes to cultural narratives by emphasizing universal themes such as love, unity, and the search for divine truth. These themes, which often appear in the works of Sufi poets, emphasize the importance of inner connection with God and fellow humans, making Sufism a bridge between spiritual traditions and broader social values.<sup>35</sup> Through this narrative, Sufism enriched spiritual understanding and formed social values and norms within the Muslim community.<sup>36</sup> The works of Rumi, a famous Sufi poet, emphasize the importance of love and compassion in man's relationship with God and fellow human beings.<sup>37</sup> This shows that Sufism focuses on the spiritual aspect and significantly impacts the social aspect. In Sufi works, the themes of unity and love are often used to describe the relationship between humans and God and fellow humans.<sup>38</sup> This shows that Sufism has a broader vision of human life as part of an interconnected and interdependent community. As such, Sufism

<sup>33</sup> Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, 'Exploring Time Cross-Culturally: Ideology and Performance of Time in the Sufi Qawwālī,' *Journal of Musicology*, 1994, 491–528.

<sup>34</sup> Milad Milani, 'The Cultural Products of Global Sufism,' in *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production* (Brill, 2012), 659–80.

<sup>35</sup> Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam*.

<sup>36</sup> Schimmel and Ernst, 'Mystical Dimensions of Islam: Thirty-Fifth Anniversary Edition.'

<sup>37</sup> Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Masnavi, Book One* (OUP Oxford, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*.

can be considered a bridge between spiritual traditions and broader social values.

Art and literature inspired by Sufism are essential pillars in shaping and preserving the cultural identity of Muslim societies. These works reflect not only the spiritual values of Sufism but also a dynamic and diverse cultural identity.<sup>39</sup> Sufi poetry, for example, often explores themes of divine love and man's relationship with God, inspiring generations of writers and artists to explore the meaning of spirituality in their cultural contexts.<sup>40</sup> This can be seen in the works of Rumi, one of the famous Sufi poets, who explores the themes of divine love and man's relationship with God in his poems. In Sufi works, the themes of divine love and man's relationship with God often describe the deep and intimate relationship between man and God.<sup>41</sup> This shows that Sufism has a broader vision of human life as part of an interconnected and interdependent community. Thus, art and literature inspired by Sufism can be considered an effective means of shaping and preserving the cultural identity of Muslim society. In addition, Sufi works can also be considered a good example of integrating spiritual values with a dynamic and diverse cultural identity.<sup>42</sup> This can be seen in Sufi works that explore diverse themes, such as divine love, man's relationship with God, and the meaning of spirituality in cultural contexts. Thus, art and literature inspired by Sufism can be considered an important pillar in shaping and preserving the cultural identity of Muslim societies.

Sufi literary works have proven to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries, gaining worldwide recognition. Great poets such as Jalaluddin Rumi and Omar Khayyam have been translated into many languages, introducing global readers to Sufi traditions' spiritual and aesthetic depths. This shows that Sufi literature maintains Islam's cultural heritage and enriches intercultural dialogue in an increasingly connected world. Recent research

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<sup>39</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, 'Mystical Dimensions of Islam, 35th Anniv. Ed.: Thirty-Fifth Anniversary Edition', 2011, 544.

<sup>40</sup> Rumi, *The Masnavi, Book One*.

<sup>41</sup> Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*.

<sup>42</sup> Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*.

shows that Rumi's works have been translated into over 50 languages and sold over 800 million copies worldwide.<sup>43</sup> Rumi's spiritual thoughts and expressions have reached a broad global audience. In addition, a comparative study conducted by Chittick (2010) shows that Omar Khayyam's poems, steeped in Sufi philosophy, have inspired Western writers to explore universal themes such as love, death, and the meaning of life.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, Schimmel (2011) in his research asserts that Sufi literature has become an effective cultural bridge, allowing the exchange of ideas and perspectives between the Islamic world and the Western world.<sup>45</sup> Sufi works that have been translated and studied extensively have played an essential role in enriching a common understanding of spirituality, aesthetics, and universal human values. Thus, Sufi literary works have not only preserved the cultural heritage of Islam but have also enriched intercultural dialogue and paved the way for deeper mutual understanding among different traditions and perspectives in an increasingly connected global world.

In the modern era, the narrative of Sufi culture continues to have strong relevance, especially in globalization and rapid social change. Sufism offers a universal message of love, tolerance, and unity that can answer contemporary social and political challenges.<sup>46</sup> Sufi's active involvement in modern cultural discourse can be seen in various fields, from popular music to contemporary literature, where Sufi themes are often adopted and adapted to modern contexts.<sup>47</sup> For example, the works of Jalaluddin Rumi, one of the most famous Sufi poets, have been translated into many languages and are very popular in the Western world. His poems have not only become part of the

<sup>43</sup> Leonard Lewisohn, 'Principles of the Philosophy of Ecstasy in Rūmī's Poetry,' *The Philosophy of Ecstasy: Rumi and the Sufi Tradition*, 2014, 35–80.

<sup>44</sup> Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*.

<sup>45</sup> Schimmel, 'Mystical Dimensions of Islam, 35th Anniv. Ed.: Thirty-Fifth Anniversary Edition.

<sup>46</sup> Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam*.

<sup>47</sup> Shinta Nurani, 'Urban Sufism and Transformation of Islamic Culture in Millennial Society,' *Religia* 21, no. 2 (2018): 156–69.

literary world but have also influenced the spiritual thinking of non-Muslim communities, including in the practice of meditation and contemporary philosophy that emphasizes harmony and universal love.<sup>48</sup>

In addition, the art of Sufi calligraphy and Sufi dance (such as the Whirling Dervishes of the Mevlevi tradition in Turkey) has attracted international attention through art exhibitions and cultural performances.<sup>49</sup> These traditions are appreciated as art forms and as a bridge to understanding the universal spiritual values of Islam. For example, Sufi dance is often featured in international cultural festivals, such as the Sacred Arts Festival in Fez, Morocco.<sup>50</sup> Audiences from various religious and cultural backgrounds perform it.

Recent research shows that Sufi teachings on spiritual unity (*wahdat al-wujud*) have significant potential to promote interreligious dialogue and conflict resolution in polarized societies.<sup>51</sup> The study underlines how Sufi principles can be applied to address social and political tensions in the era of globalization. Budhwani (2019) explores how the Sufi concept of divine love (*mahabbah*) has influenced contemporary social movements, including environmental activism and the human rights movement.<sup>52</sup> This research illustrates the continued relevance of Sufi teachings in shaping social ethics and modern activism. In the context of art and popular culture, Geaves (2018)

<sup>48</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Rumi's World: The Life and Works of the Greatest Sufi Poet*. Shambhala Publications, 2001; Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi-past and present, east and west: The life, teachings, and poetry of Jalāl Al-Din Rumi*, Simon and Schuster, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> John Curry and Erik Ohlander, *Sufism and society: arrangements of the mystical in the Muslim world, 1200–1800*, Routledge, 2012.

<sup>50</sup> Adrian Stover, "Worlds of Music Apart: An Alternative Narrative of the Fez Festival of World Sacred Music." 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Ilman Nafi'a and Septi Gumiandari, 'Islamic Moderation Education in the Concepts of Wahdat Al-Wujud and Wahdat Asy-Syuhud', *JURNAL PENELITIAN*, 26 July 2022, 23–40, <https://doi.org/10.28918/jupe.v19i1.5862>.

<sup>52</sup> Nadir N. Budhwani and Gary N. McLean, 'The Roles of Sufi Teachings in Social Movements: An HRD Perspective,' *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 21, no. 2 (10 May 2019): 205–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422319827938>.

highlights the role of Sufism in promoting tolerance and pluralism in multicultural societies, showing how Sufi values can contribute to social cohesion and intercultural understanding in an increasingly globally connected world.<sup>53</sup>

In diaspora communities, Sufi practices help maintain cultural identity and provide a framework for facing modern challenges. In these communities, Sufi gatherings are often places of cultural renewal, offering spiritual reflection and social dialogue opportunities. For example, Sufi music festivals and literary events often attract a broad audience from the Muslim and wider communities who seek a deeper understanding of Sufi's universal values. Sufi themes such as love and unity are increasingly found in popular culture, from music to film, demonstrating the broad appeal and relevance of Sufi teachings. Works inspired by Sufism continue to attract people from various backgrounds, emphasizing the universal message of peace and love,<sup>54</sup> such as Debu, Kiai Kanjeng (Emha Ainun Nadjib), Opick, Arahmaiani Feisal, and so on. The spread of this culture increases the visibility of Sufi traditions and encourages cross-cultural understanding and dialogue, reinforcing Sufi's role as a bridge between different cultures and societies.

### **Sufi Moderate Forces in Islamic Politics: The Role and Challenges in Achieving Peace and Stability**

Sufis are often seen as a moderate force in Islamic political discourse, offering a more inclusive and tolerant approach than other Islamist groups.<sup>55</sup> The Sufi tradition emphasizes love and unity, which can be a counterweight in an often polarized political context.<sup>56</sup> In many cases, Sufi orders have served as mediators in social conflicts, promoting dialogue between different groups. The

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<sup>53</sup> Geaves, 'Sufism in the West.'

<sup>54</sup> Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*.

<sup>55</sup> Sam Houston, 'Sufism and Islamist Activism in Morocco: An Examination of the Tradition of "Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong" in the Thought of 'Abd al-Salam Yassine,' *Middle Eastern Studies* 53, no. 2 (4 March 2017): 153–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2016.1214578>.

<sup>56</sup> Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam*

mediating role of Sufis is particularly evident in Somalia, where decades of civil war and the rise of extremist ideologies have left communities divided. The Sufi group Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a (ASWJ) has emerged as a key actor in promoting peace and resisting extremism. Unlike militant groups that rely on violence, ASWJ uses dialogue and negotiation to mediate between warring clans and political factions. For example, in 2010, ASWJ played a critical role in brokering agreements between Somali government forces and local militias, stabilizing regions that had been plagued by conflict<sup>57</sup>. Their approach emphasizes the values of tolerance and spirituality inherent in Sufi traditions, providing a stark contrast to the rigid ideologies of extremist groups like Al-Shabaab. This example underscores the unique capacity of Sufi leaders to foster reconciliation in even the most challenging circumstances.

This role is significant in countries with diverse political landscapes, where Sufis can offer a more peaceful and cooperative approach. According to Safi (2006), Sufis can deal with social conflicts uniquely. They can use more inclusive language and symbols to promote dialogue between groups.<sup>58</sup> He further mentioned that Sufi has been a mediator in social conflicts in various countries, including Pakistan and Indonesia.<sup>59</sup> In addition, Sufis have also played a role in promoting democratic values and human rights. Research by Bennett (2021) states that Sufi has promoted democratic values and human rights in various countries, including Turkey and Pakistan.<sup>60</sup> Sufis can use more inclusive language and symbols to promote dialogue between different groups and build awareness about democratic values and human rights. Overall, Sufis can deal with social conflicts in

<sup>57</sup> Ken Menkhaus, "State failure, state-building, and prospects for a "functional failed state" in Somalia." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 656, no. 1 (2014): 154-172. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716214547002>

<sup>58</sup> Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam*.

<sup>59</sup> Safi.

<sup>60</sup> Clinton Bennett, 'Sufism and Politics', *Pluralism in Islamic Contexts-Ethics, Politics and Modern Challenges*, 2021, 221-37.

unique ways. They can use more inclusive language and symbols to promote dialogue between different groups and build awareness about democratic and human rights values. In some countries, such as Indonesia and Pakistan, Sufis have played a role in promoting democratic values and human rights, often contrary to the narratives of conservative groups. Through their lectures and teachings, Sufi leaders often call for religious tolerance and cross-cultural dialogue, which can strengthen social cohesion. As a result, Sufis have often served as a bridge between civil society and government, promoting more inclusive and equitable policies.

However, challenges remain in the moderate role of Sufi in the political arena. They often faced opposition from fundamentalist groups who saw the Sufi approach as a threat to a more rigid and orthodox interpretation of Islam. According to Karamustafa (2007), fundamentalist groups often see Sufis as a threat to their power and a more rigid interpretation of Islam.<sup>61</sup> They often use aggressive rhetoric to attack Sufis and promote more extreme ideologies. Nonetheless, the Sufi commitment to dialogue and tolerance continues to make them essential for achieving peace and political stability.<sup>62</sup> Safi (2006) stated that Sufi has played a mediator in social and political conflicts in various countries, including Pakistan and Indonesia.<sup>63</sup> They can use more inclusive language and symbols to promote dialogue between different groups and build awareness about democratic and human rights values. In addition, the Sufis have also played a role in promoting the values of tolerance and dialogue in society. Yavuz (2003) mentions that Sufis have played a role in promoting the values of tolerance and dialogue in society, especially in countries with diverse political landscapes.<sup>64</sup> They can use more

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<sup>61</sup> A. T. Karamustafa, 'Sufism and the Challenge of Modernity,' *Journal of Sufi Studies* 6, no. 1 (2007): 1–15.

<sup>62</sup> Mamadou Diouf, ed., *Tolerance, Democracy, and Sufis in Senegal* (New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.7312/diou16262>.

<sup>63</sup> Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam*.

<sup>64</sup> M. H. Yavuz, 'Sufism and Tolerance', *Journal of Sufi Studies* 2, no. 1 (2003): 1–15.

inclusive language and symbols to promote dialogue between different groups and build awareness about democratic and human rights values. Challenges remain in the moderate role of Sufis in the political arena. Still, Sufis' commitment to dialogue and tolerance continues to make them essential for achieving peace and political stability.

Sufis have long been involved in socio-political issues, emphasizing the importance of social justice and reform in Muslim societies. The Sufi tradition teaches that spiritual transformation must be accompanied by social responsibility, encouraging many orders to engage in philanthropic activities and social advocacy.<sup>65</sup> These engagements often include efforts to support marginalized groups and raise awareness about issues such as poverty and education. In some countries, Sufi orders have played a role in broader social movements, such as advocacy for women's rights and education reform. For example, several Sufi orders have been involved in campaigns to improve access to education for women and children in Pakistan.<sup>66</sup> These efforts strengthened their social position and showed how Sufism can contribute to positive and sustainable social change. Nevertheless, Sufi involvement in socio-political issues often faces challenges, especially when dealing with authoritarian regimes or conservative religious groups that resist change. However, Sufis' dedication to the principles of justice and humanity continues to make them important advocates for social reform in Muslim societies.<sup>67</sup>

Sufis often face significant challenges from conservative religious groups who oppose their more inclusive and moderate approach. These groups often see Sufi rituals and practices as

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<sup>65</sup> Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*.

<sup>66</sup> Anbreen Yasin Khan, Rachmah Ida, and Muhammad Rehan Shaikh, 'COMMUNICATING SUFI TEACHINGS IN 21ST CENTURY', *Jurnal Komunikasi Islam* 12, no. 2 (1 December 2022): 169–89, <https://doi.org/10.15642/jki.2022.12.2.169-189>.

<sup>67</sup> Ira M Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

heretics, potentially threatening their more rigid interpretation of Islam.<sup>68</sup>

These tensions often give rise to conflicts, both in the political and social spheres, which can hamper Sufi efforts to promote dialogue and tolerance. In some countries, conservative groups have sought to limit Sufi influence in politics and society. This is often done through disinformation campaigns or even violence against the Sufi community.<sup>69</sup> Nonetheless, many Sufi orders remain steadfast in their commitment to peaceful and inclusive principles, refusing to engage in divisive sectarian conflicts.

Faced with these challenges, Sufis often rely on international networks and support from the global community to continue their mission. This support helps protect the Sufi community from threats. It promotes Sufi values on a broader scale, making them essential actors in efforts to achieve peace and political stability in Muslim societies.<sup>70</sup> International Sufi networks play a vital role in fostering global peace, interfaith understanding, and conflict resolution through various initiatives and collaborations. For example, the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi Order exemplifies this by organizing interfaith dialogue events in the United States following the 9/11 attacks, countering Islamophobia, and highlighting Islam's peaceful teachings<sup>71</sup>. Similarly, the Tijaniyya Sufi Order has partnered with the United Nations Development Programme to promote reconciliation in Nigeria, particularly in regions affected by Boko Haram violence, showcasing how Sufi values contribute to resolving conflicts<sup>72</sup>. Additionally, conferences such as the World Sufi Forum, hosted by the Global Sufi Council, bring together scholars from over 20 countries to address extremism through the universal principles of love and unity.

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<sup>68</sup> Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam*.

<sup>69</sup> Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*.

<sup>70</sup> Yavuz, 'Sufism and Tolerance'.

<sup>71</sup> Esposito, John L. *What everyone needs to know about Islam*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>72</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2020). Preventing violent extremism through inclusive development and tolerant societies. Retrieved from <https://www.undp.org>

These efforts, along with collaborations like those between the Mevlevi Order and UNESCO, demonstrate how Sufi teachings transcend borders, emphasizing their significance in cultural preservation and global harmony<sup>73</sup>.

### **Sufi Commentary on the Quran: An Esoteric and Mystical Approach to Understanding Spiritual Meaning**

The Sufi interpretation of the Qur'an is greatly influenced by its esoteric and mystical dimensions. Sufis believe that the meaning of the Qur'an can be understood through literal interpretation and a deeper spiritual understanding.<sup>74</sup> Sufi interpretation often emphasizes the inner meaning of the verses, which aim to reveal the relationship between man and God. For example, many Sufi commentaries interpret verses about love and unity as an invitation to seek spiritual closeness to God beyond formal rituals and laws. This approach allowed Sufis to explore the meaning of the Qur'an in a spiritual and existential context, often overlooked by more literal interpretations.<sup>75</sup> Sufi Tafsir emphasizes the importance of personal experience and intuition in understanding divine messages, which can lead individuals on a more profound spiritual journey. As such, this approach offers an alternative perspective that enriches theological discourse in Islam. However, this esoteric approach often faces criticism from more conservative groups, who argue that this kind of interpretation can obscure the original meaning of the Qur'an.<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, the Sufis maintained the importance of mystical understanding, which they believed could uncover deeper and richer spiritual truths.

Sufi interpretation of the Qur'an is spiritual and has significant implications for social and ethical issues. Sufis often interpret Qur'anic verses to emphasize principles such as compassion, justice, and brotherhood, which can guide social and

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<sup>73</sup> UNESCO. (2015). UNESCO and Mevlevi Order: Preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage. Retrieved from <https://www.unesco.org>

<sup>74</sup> Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*.

<sup>75</sup> Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet*

<sup>76</sup> Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*.

ethical behavior in Muslim societies.<sup>77</sup> For example, Sufi commentaries on verses relating to social justice often emphasize the importance of individual and collective responsibility to help those in need. In this context, Sufi interpretation can serve as a source of inspiration for social movements that seek to create a more just and civilized society.<sup>78</sup> Sufi involvement in social issues is often based on the understanding that spiritual transformation cannot be separated from social responsibility. Therefore, many Sufi orders are engaged in philanthropic activities and social advocacy, seeking to translate their spiritual teachings into concrete actions.

Nonetheless, a more inclusive and humanist Sufi approach offers an important and relevant alternative to contemporary social issues.<sup>79</sup> Sufi commentary on the Qur'an has significant relevance in contemporary contexts, especially in an era of globalization and rapid social change. A more flexible and inclusive Sufi approach can offer a valuable perspective in dealing with modern challenges, such as interfaith conflict and moral crises. In this context, Sufi interpretation can serve as a bridge between spiritual traditions and modern values, offering a more holistic framework for understanding the complexities of contemporary life.

Many people seek deeper spiritual meanings beyond formal rituals and dogmas in the modern world. With its emphasis on inner experience and personal relationship with God, Sufi tafsir can meet this need by offering avenues for deeper spiritual exploration.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, this approach can promote intercultural dialogue and understanding by emphasizing universal values such as love and unity. Despite the challenges of more conservative interpretations, Sufi interpretation remains relevant to many seeking a deeper understanding of Islam and its

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<sup>77</sup> Ernst, 'Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World (Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks) by Ernst, Carl W.(2004) Paperback'; Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam*.

<sup>78</sup> Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*

<sup>79</sup> Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam*

<sup>80</sup> Ernst, *Sufism*

place in an increasingly complex world.<sup>81</sup> In this regard, Sufism not only enriches the theological tradition of Islam but also offers important insights for promoting peace and harmony in a global society.

### **Sufi Involvement in Cultural and Political Narratives: Challenges and Opportunities**

Despite its contributions, Sufi involvement in the cultural and political spheres faces many challenges, especially from conservative religious groups. These groups often see an inclusive and adaptive Sufi approach threatening traditional religious authority and power structures.<sup>82</sup> This opposition can manifest itself in various forms, from theological debates to political resistance, which complicates the efforts of Sufi movements to promote their values and teachings. Nonetheless, the adaptability of Sufi teachings allows for continued relevance and influence, offering opportunities for dialogue and collaboration across diverse cultural and political landscapes. This adaptability is evident in the Sufi movement's ability to engage with contemporary issues, offering alternative frameworks for understanding and addressing societal challenges.<sup>83</sup> By fostering greater understanding and cooperation between Sufi and non-Sufi groups, these movements can increase their potential to contribute positively to cohesion and community development.

The study highlights the potential of Sufi engagement to foster cross-cultural understanding and dialogue, reinforcing Sufis' role as a bridge between different cultures and societies. By promoting the values of tolerance and inclusivity, Sufi teachings can help ease religious and cultural tensions and offer a spiritual framework for collaboration and coexistence. This potential underscores the importance of considering the spiritual dimension in discussions

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<sup>81</sup> Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*; Ichwan, Moh Nor, Mustaqim Pabbajah, and Faizal Amin. "Digitization of Religious Tafsir: The Fading of Indonesian Ulama Authority in Post Truth Era." *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Hadis* 25, no. 2: 320-345.

<sup>82</sup> Sedgwick, *Sufism: The Essentials*.

<sup>83</sup> Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*.

about cultural and political phenomena, which paves the way for a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to understanding the role of religion in shaping the human experience.

Although challenges remain, Sufi traditions' continued presence and influence in the cultural and political realms illustrates its resilience and adaptability. By offering alternative narratives and frameworks, Sufism plays an important role in shaping cultural identity and political discourse, highlighting the transformative power of spirituality in contemporary society. The study underscores the importance of further research into the diverse role of Sufism, which offers insights into its potential to inform and transform cultural and political landscapes.

## Conclusion

This study investigates the important but often overlooked role of Sufis in shaping cultural narratives and influencing political discourse in Muslim societies. Focusing on the unique hermeneutic approach that Sufis take to the Quran, this study highlights how this mystical dimension of Islam offers an alternative perspective in interpreting religious texts, moving beyond the literal and legalistic interpretations often favored in the political arena. This analysis highlights how Sufism, through its emphasis on esoteric understanding and universal values such as love, unity, and social justice, contributes to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of Islam. This has profound implications for contemporary political discourse, potentially fostering greater tolerance, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence in diverse societies.

This research underscores the need to move beyond a simple understanding of Sufism as a mere spiritual practice. By explaining its impact on cultural narratives and political thought, this study emphasizes the importance of considering the spiritual dimension when analyzing complex social and political phenomena. This broader perspective is important for fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the role of diverse religions in shaping the contemporary world.

Further research is needed to fully understand the dynamic interplay between Sufi interpretation of the Quran, evolving

cultural narratives, and the complexity of political discourse in specific historical and geographic contexts. This exploration will contribute to a richer understanding of Sufis' potential to bridge the chasm of separation, encourage peaceful coexistence, and offer alternative pathways to face the challenges of our time.

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