

# When Executives Chant *Dhikr*

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Indonesia

If you want to see executives and (retired) high functionaries chanting *dhikr*, confession of faith, reading the *Qur'an* together, and enthusiastically listening religious sermons, go to Jakarta. You will find them doing such activities in luxurious venues, such as starred hotels and convention centres. They are not practicing certain rituals of *sufi* order, but attending short courses of *sufism*, in which they are trying to enjoy the magnificence of this particular brand of Islam. To be able to participate in such activities, they must spend significant amounts of money and have time to spare.

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The engagement of executives and members of the upper-middle class in chanting *dhikr* constitutes a trend that has gradually become a new symbol of elitism. This tendency can be traced back to the 1970s when one of the most popular *sufi* orders centered in Tasikmalaya, the Qadiriyyah wa Naqsabandiyah, organized training courses for preachers in Jakarta. These training courses involved not only prominent Muslim scholars, but also a number of high-ranking Muslim military officials, including A. H. Nasution, H. Sudirman, Alamsjah Ratuprawiranegara, A. Soleiman and Ali Murtopo. The Qadiriyyah wa Naqsabandiyah quickly attracted a large following among elites and members of the middle class. Its centres of activities were established in various places in Jakarta and surrounding.

The success of the Qadiriyyah wa Naqsabandiyah was followed by another *sufi* order, the Naqsabandiyah, which was led by Kadirun Yahya. This particular *sufi* order also found fertile ground in Jakarta, appealing particularly to certain political elites (see Howell, 2001). The smaller *sufi* orders, including Tijaniyah, Idrisiyah, Alawiyah, Satariyah and Shadziliyah, lost no time in competing with them, and succeeded in gaining a great deal of influence within the middle class in Jakarta. Later, new *sufi* orders, such as Haqqani - which aggressively developed its transnational network - also began to take root among Jakarta's middle class.

The proliferation of *sufism* among members of the middle class in Jakarta became more pronounced at the beginning of the 1990s, when the presence of Islamic symbols in the public sphere became more prominent. It was facilitated by the emergence of contemporary religious communities, whose growth was not significantly disturbed by the outbreak of the economic and political crisis which followed the collapse of the New Order regime. Different types of contemporary Islamic communities have rigorously competed to offer various courses of *sufism*, whose basic elements comprise chanting *dhikr*, reciting the *Qur'an*, and listening religious sermons. Paramadina, Tazkiya Sejati, and Darut Tauhid are among such communities that have gained increasing popularity among executives and (retired) high functionaries in Jakarta.

The Paramadina was established by a number of progressive Muslim intellectuals in collaboration with Muslim entrepreneurs. Prominent Muslim leaders and successful entrepreneurs, including Nurcholis Madjid, Dawam Rahardjo, Utomo Dananjaya, Abdul Latief and Fahmi Idris, form the core of the Paramadina community, which has evolved into an urban-elite religious institution. The Paramadina created a number of Islamic study programmes specially designed for executives, professionals, practitioners, functionaries, and other members of the middle class. In line with the growing interest in *sufism* among its participants, the Paramadina designed a programme called 'Paramadina Eksekutif', which consists of a number of study sessions. After the Paramadina had gained considerable success, Jalaluddin Rahmat, in collaboration with a number of businessmen, established the Tazkiya Sejati, offering educational programmes on *sufism* for members of the upper-middle class. The Tazkiya Sejati has an office based in Patra Kuningan, an elite area of Jakarta, and incorporates such elements as *dhikr*, *salawat* (prayer for Muhammad), poetry, music, and sermons, into its programmes. Another successfully established contemporary religious community in Jakarta is the Darut Tauhid, which is led by Abdullah Gymnastiar and evolved from a *pesantren* he built in Bandung in 1987. The basic doctrine of the Darut Tauhid includes *dhikr*, *fikr* (thinking), and *ikhtiyar* (free choice). Its participants believe that *dhikr* is the primary principle on which Muslims should rely, in the sense that God is the only focus in Muslim activities. The mission of the Darut Tauhid declares that its mission is to fill the 'spiritual void' of the urban people through its programme, 'Manajemen Qalbu' (the management of heart), whose aim is to manage and maintain purity of heart in the way of knowing God.

The Paramadina, Tazkiya Sejati, Darut Tauhid provided a model for similar institutions that have appeared more recently, such as Makrifat, Liqa Allah, and Zakya Maqta. The

Makrifat is a series of *sufism* courses, organized by Ageng Rahmat, whose purpose is to give knowledge about *sufism* by practicing *dhikr* for soul purification (*tazkiya al-nafs*), whereby a sense of unification with God (*tajjali*) is imparted. The Makrifat has some similarities with the Liqa Allah ('to reach God'), which was established by Hamdani Saibani under the sponsorship of a retired general. The Liqa Allah has been very active in offering its series of *sufism* courses, regularly organized in Golden Truly, Fatmawati, Jakarta. The Zakya Maqta was established by Bijak Bestari, who argued that *sufism* was a way or method to become close to Allah, the greatest creator. The key element of his method is the sense of achieving integrity with our own egos through the chanting of *dhikr* three hours a day. The Zakya Maqta introduced the function of *dhikr* as a positive energy that can be used to enhance the dimensions of inner power of the human being.

Image of executives chanting *dhikr*.



Courtesy of Darut Tauhid.

It quickly gained popularity through the support of ANTV, a private television station in Jakarta which broadcasts its activities. Twice a month on Saturdays ANTV airs 'ALTERNATIF', which contains an interactive dialogue and transfer of the so-called hyper-metaphysic energy by reciting the words of Allah Akbar repeatedly.

The phenomenon of modern *sufism*, a debated, but widely used term, cannot be disassociated with the rapid social changes arising from the process of modernization. The developments of education, communication media, urbanization, and national political integration undoubtedly play a highly crucial role in introducing secularization and new forms of communicative knowledge. Such a process has been accelerated by the vagaries of globalization, which drive people to resent the loss of control over their lives, over their societies, over their states, and above all over their fate on Earth. Within the accelerated process of modernization, that which Jürgen Habermas calls the 'internal colonization of the life-world and penetration of economic and administrative rationality into everyday life' is inevitably felt by many people (Habermas, 1987).

Modern *sufism* is particularly appealing for members of the middle class, who feel the effects of modernization directly. They are involved in business activities or absorbed by large modern companies and bureaucratic machines, and often cannot separate themselves from business policy, capitalist interests, or corrupt bureaucracy. For members of the middle class in Jakarta, the metropolitan life is like a liminal moment, when all paradoxes of life are experienced. In a life filled with such symbols of modernity, they experience the moments of separation and marginality as it happens in a ritual.

In such a situation, some members of the middle class are afflicted by anxieties that lead to a crisis of identity. This crisis becomes a source of meaning in the way that the purpose of certain actions is symbolically identified. In the so-called network society, the search for meaning is normally organized around a primary identity, which is self-sustaining across time and space. Within this context, religion appears as a

strong and influential source of identity, and often takes part in the organization of this meaning (Castells, 1999). In search of the primary identity, the strong emphasis of Islam on communal life and social responsibility is particularly appealing. Within communal life, people can freely define new meanings whereby identity can be regained.

Within this context, modern *sufism* provides not only a spiritual discourse but also the basis of communal life to disaffected members of the middle class. It is not, however, in the sense of traditional *sufi* orders - which emphasize the search of the ultimate goal of life, as a result of the tension with the world - or inward-looking mystics whose goals are geared towards achieving the highest stage of the vertical man-God relationship. Modern *sufism* is, instead, a type of creative synthesis to the existing world order, which lies mainly in its tendency to promote the esoteric dimension of Islam and show its respect for pluralism and tolerance.

When the sessions of *sufism* are offered, in which the internalization of certain *dhikrs* is emphasized, members of the middle class welcome them enthusiastically. For them this provides a kind of moment to enter a phase of aggregation, in which the paradoxes of life they have experienced are reconciled. As a ritual component, *dhikr* plays an important role in the phase of aggregation and, at the same time, provides a

sense of identity for those involved. It represents forms of symbolic expression whereby communications concerning social relationships are passed on, in stylized and dramatized ways. Through this ritual, the power of identity and collective feelings of belonging are reinforced. Within it, *sufism* is related very much to puritanical notions: a consciousness that the purity of Muslims has been stained, and so required purification. *Dhikr* constitutes the way to perform the purification. In short, *sufism* provides a cooling mantle for the disaffected middle class within a communal or quasi-communal life. <

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