



Sufi Dance in the Context of Indonesian Islamic Culture: Art Learning Strategies for Preserving Aesthetics and Spiritual Meaning

Imrotul Afifah^{1*}; Hartono²

Pendidikan Seni, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia^{1,2}

*Corresponding Author. Email: imrotulafifahsenitari11@students.unnes.ac.id¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze and examine Sufi dance within the context of Islamic culture, focusing on the integration of aesthetics and spirituality in the adaptation of Sufi dance in the Indonesian archipelago, as well as the interpretation of meanings embedded in the signs of Sufi dance movements. This research employs a qualitative approach combined with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method. The data and sources consist of primary data (Sufi dance pioneers, instructors, dancers, and audiences or congregations who witness Sufi dance) and secondary data derived from documents or historical records of Sufi events in the archipelago, as well as scholarly articles related to Sufi dance. Data collection techniques include in-depth interviews, participant observation, document studies, and life history analysis. Data analysis involves an in-depth exploration of how meanings in various movements are conveyed through signs found in archives, historical records, and historical events. The analysis also investigates how the integration between aesthetics and spirituality in Sufi dance can create a dynamic interplay within the values of Islamic culture in the archipelago. The findings reveal that Sufi dance is a sacred performance that embodies spiritual values in every movement, with symbolic meanings deeply rooted in religious contexts. The counterclockwise spinning movement, which serves as the core gesture of Sufi dance, symbolizes the rotation of the Earth and the tawaf around the Kaaba. Various meaningful movements in Sufi dance, analyzed through denotative and connotative interpretations, conclude that these movements represent the meaning of human life both physically and metaphysically. Moreover, they illustrate how aesthetics and spirituality interact in the context of Islamic culture in the Indonesian archipelago, resulting in a Sufi dance style that incorporates improvisation and adaptation from its cultural origins.

Keywords: Sufi Dance, Islamic Culture in the Indonesian Archipelago, Aesthetics, Spirituality, Roland Barthes' Semiotics.

Introduction

Humans are beings endowed with the gift of intellect, which enables them to create, innovate, transform, renew, improve, and enhance existing elements for the sake of human life. Beyond fulfilling material needs, the human intellect also allows the creation of culture. Culture, in essence, is the result of human intellect in its interaction with both nature and fellow human beings. Humans are

inherently cultural beings and the creators of culture. Culture is the product of human thought, feeling, and will (Herimanto & Winarno, 2008: 19–21). In social life, human beings cannot be separated from culture or tradition, as these are the products of their own creative capacity. Moreover, culture is also shaped by the behaviors and practices carried out collectively within a society.

Culture is a concept that has long intrigued scholars. Formally, it is defined as an organized system of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, time, roles, spatial relations, and cosmology. It manifests itself in patterns of language, as well as in activities and behaviors that serve as models for adaptation and communication styles, enabling individuals to coexist in a community (Deddy Mulyana & Jalaludin Rakhmat, 2014: 18). Culture thus informs the way humans live: how they think, feel, believe, and strive in accordance with their cultural norms. Language, friendship, eating habits, communication practices, social behavior, economic and political activities, and technology all follow cultural patterns. As such, culture influences us from the moment we are in the womb until death—and even after death, as burial rituals also adhere to cultural norms (Deddy Mulyana & Jalaludin Rakhmat, 2014: 19).

The spread of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago did not occur through coercion but through a subtle and wise process of acculturation, often expressed through art and culture. Amidst the richness of local traditions, scholars and religious leaders (ulama and wali) disseminated Islamic teachings in contextually relevant ways, one of which was through the art of dance. Over time, this gave rise to forms of dance that were not only aesthetically captivating but also imbued with deep spiritual meaning, later known as Sufi dance. Originating from the mystical tradition of tasawwuf, Sufi dance emphasizes the inner journey toward God through love, remembrance (dhikr), and spiritual purification. In the Indonesian context, Sufi dance serves as a bridge between art and worship, body and soul, local culture and religious doctrine.

Sufi dance—internationally known as the whirling dervish—is a foreign art form that entered and developed in Indonesia. It was created by Jalaluddin Rumi, a Persian Islamic theologian and Sufi poet, as an act of devotion and as an expression of love and compassion toward God and toward the Prophet Muhammad as the perfect exemplar.

In Indonesia, this ritual art is widely known as Tari Sufi, owing to its creator's identity as a Sufi master. The dance is characterized by distinctive, prolonged spinning movements accompanied by musical recitations of prayer. This motion is believed to serve as a form of meditation aimed at spiritual closeness to God.

As a manifestation of Islamic mysticism, Sufi dance has long been a vital part of the spiritual expression of communities in the Indonesian archipelago. Coordinated bodily movements, repetitive musical rhythms, and tasawwuf-inspired lyrics create an atmosphere of deep sacredness. However, in the face of modernization and the commercialization of traditional arts, the symbolic meanings embedded in each movement risk being overlooked or misunderstood. Without a deep understanding of its context, Sufi dance is at risk of being reduced to mere performance, stripped of its spiritual essence.

Historically, dance in Sufi tradition is not simply a form of entertainment or aesthetic expression but a spiritual path toward God. In tasawwuf, the body, movement, and rhythm are understood as means to attain the states of fana (the dissolution of the self in God) and baqa (eternal subsistence in Divine love). Classical examples, such as the Whirling Dervishes of the Mevlevi Order in Turkey, illustrate the fusion of graceful movement and transcendent experience. In the Indonesian context, Sufi dance incorporates local cultural elements alongside Sufi teachings, creating a rich and spiritually profound art form.

Its beauty has become a major attraction at cultural festivals, art performances, and even on social media. Yet the core spiritual values—dhikr, humility, and unity with God—are often overlooked or misunderstood by modern audiences. This raises a cultural dilemma: should Sufi dance be preserved as a form of worship and mystical expression, or can it be appreciated purely as an aesthetic spectacle? In the era of globalization and digital culture, traditional spiritual arts face significant challenges in

both preservation and relevance. Sufi dance, in particular, is frequently commodified as entertainment without consideration of its symbolic and religious context.

Problems arise when Sufi dance, originally a sacred ritual performed with devotional intent and accompanied by dhikr, is presented in secular events devoid of its spiritual framework. In many cases, young dancers are trained only to memorize movements without being taught their underlying meaning. Consequently, the dance loses its depth, transforming into a cultural commodity consumed superficially. This reflects a process of decontextualization, wherein sacred symbols are reduced to mere visual ornaments without spiritual substance.

On the other hand, the aesthetic appeal of Sufi dance can be an effective tool for cultural dakwah (Islamic outreach). Its beauty has the power to attract younger generations and global audiences to see Islam through a lens of peace, beauty, and humanity. In this context, aesthetics is not the enemy of spirituality but a bridge that can guide people toward deeper meaning. Nonetheless, the balance between the two must be maintained so that Sufi dance retains its identity as an act of worship.

It is therefore essential to re-examine the relationship between aesthetics and spirituality in Sufi dance, particularly through art education among the younger generation. This study aims to explore how these two dimensions interact: does aesthetics reinforce spirituality, or does it obscure it? By understanding this dynamic, Sufi dance can be preserved not only as a cultural heritage but also as an authentic and meaningful expression of faith.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach combined with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, which investigates the nature of signs and interprets them through descriptive explanations in narrative form to elucidate reality. Descriptive qualitative

analysis involves portraying an object, phenomenon, or social setting in written, narrative form. The data and facts collected are expressed in words or images rather than numbers. In qualitative research reporting, data presentation is enriched with direct quotations from field findings to support the interpretations provided.

The primary objective of this research is to understand how the dimensions of beauty (aesthetics) and mystical experience (spirituality) interact, adapt, and shape cultural identity in the practice of Sufi dance, using semiotic analysis to uncover meanings, signs, and the hidden elements behind them. The qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to explore profound meanings, socio-cultural contexts, and the perceptions of practitioners and communities regarding the dance as both an art form and a form of worship.

The researcher used both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected directly from the field through observation, interviews, and documentation. During observation, the researcher examined and described the behavior of subjects and gathered relevant information. This form of observation is participatory in nature, as it requires establishing rapport with respondents and direct engagement with the research subjects at the site. Observations were carried out during Sufi dance rehearsals and performances, focusing on body movements, floor patterns, facial expressions, and the interaction between dancers, music, and lyrics.

Interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth information on perceptions, views, insights, and personal experiences, conveyed orally and spontaneously by respondents (Purnomo, 2020). The interviewees included dancers, choreographers, Islamic scholars (ulama), dance instructors, and community leaders familiar with the spiritual and cultural context of the dance. Open-ended questions were designed to elicit the symbolic meanings of movements, the intentions behind dancing, and perspectives on the balance between aesthetics and spirituality.

The study involved both key informants and supporting informants. Key informants are individuals with essential knowledge and information required for the research (Uhing, 2019). They must have the capability and willingness to provide relevant insights. The key informants in this study were K.H. Maulana Amin Budi Hardjono—the pioneer of Sufi dance in Indonesia—along with dance instructors responsible for training Sufi dancers for Whirling Adab events and public pengajian (religious gatherings), as well as the Sufi dancers themselves. Supporting informants are those who provide supplementary information, often connected to the key informants (Kinanti & Christian, 2023). In this study, supporting informants included invited guests and audience members attending Sufi dance performances.

Secondary data were collected through documentation, including video recordings, dance scripts, song lyrics, Islamic literature (Sufi texts), as well as academic publications, media articles, and digital content discussing Sufi dance. These materials were thematically analyzed to identify dominant narratives concerning beauty, worship, and identity in the dance. As stated by Yoga et al. (2023), documentation as a data collection method involves compiling research findings in the form of articles, brochures, photographic records, and other media. This study documented all elements related to aesthetics and spirituality in Sufi dance.

Data analysis was conducted descriptively and critically, referring to a theoretical framework that integrates concepts from tasawwuf (such as fana, mahabbah, and dhikr), Islamic aesthetic theory (Annemarie Schimmel, William Chittick), and the notion of art as spiritual expression. The process included data reduction, thematic categorization, and interpretation of meaning, with attention to the dynamics between the beauty of movement (aesthetics) and inner experience (spirituality). Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation, comparing findings from observation, interviews, and documentation. Additionally,

member checking was conducted by presenting preliminary findings to respondents to confirm the accuracy of interpretations.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Al Ishlah, located on Jalan Kompol Soekanto No. 1, Bulusan Village, Tembalang District, Meteseh, Tembalang, Semarang City, Central Java, Indonesia.

Result and Discussion

Sufi Dance in the Indonesian Archipelago

Sufi dance, often referred to as Islamic mystical dance, is a form of artistic expression that emerges from the tradition of tasawwuf (Islamic mysticism). It is not merely a form of performance or entertainment, but rather a profound spiritual ritual in which bodily movement is employed as a medium for drawing closer to God. In the Sufi tradition, dance is understood as a form of moving dhikr (dhikr-e jismi), where each movement symbolizes the spiritual journey (suluk) toward enlightenment and union with the Divine. Sufi dance has developed in various parts of the Islamic world—from Turkey and Persia to the Indonesian archipelago—taking on distinctive forms and meanings shaped by local cultural contexts.

One of the most globally recognized forms of Sufi dance is the Whirling Dervishes of the Mevlevi Order in Turkey, established by the followers of Jalaluddin Rumi, a prominent 13th-century poet and Sufi master. In Turkey, Sufi dance is more widely known as the Mevlevi Sema ceremony, which in Arabic means “listening,” but is broadly interpreted as joyful spinning to the accompaniment of music, turning in harmony with the cosmos, often counterclockwise. In the Western world, this is commonly referred to as the “Whirling Dervishes,” while in Indonesia it is simply called “Tari Sufi,” a designation rooted in its original performance by Sufi practitioners. In the 20th century, notable Sufi figures such as Hazrat Inayat Khan and Idries Shah also popularized this practice. These performances are typically

accompanied by live music, with participants forming a circle around a central leader.

However, Sufi dance is not confined to the Turkish tradition. In the Indonesian archipelago, Sufi-inspired dances have evolved into unique forms rich in symbolic meaning. While not always explicitly labeled as “Sufi dance,” many traditional dances incorporate elements of tasawwuf and serve as spiritual media. Examples include the Tari Saman from Aceh, Tari Seudati, Tari Zapin Sufi, and Tari Thalibul Muttaqin from Java. In these dances, bodily movements, musical rhythms, and song lyrics merge to create an atmosphere of devotion and deep religious meaning.

In Indonesia, Sufi dance has been popularized by K.H. Maulana Amin Budi Hardjono, who emphasizes its benefits in fostering solidarity and strengthening bonds among dancers. For practitioners, it provides not only physical and emotional enrichment but also a heightened awareness of the Divine, integrating remembrance of God into daily life.

Dance, as an artistic object, is a compelling subject for research from various methodological and theoretical perspectives. Cultural preservation must begin at the local level, as communities are the primary custodians of their cultural heritage (Rahmah et al., 2020). In this regard, dance can be regarded as a cultural text—a system of representation laden with meaning and values—that may also be understood as a system of symbols. It is a mental representation of the artist’s subjectivity and symbolic expression. Accordingly, Sufi dance can be seen as a unified symbolic presentation that points to deeper, often concealed, meanings. Movement is the core element of dance, and in the context of Sufi dance, it is not realistic or purely imitative but imbued with expressive and aesthetic form. Every movement engages the human body as a communicative medium to convey specific intentions.

The version of Sufi dance popularized by Kyai Budi Hardjono originated in 2009, when K.H. Maulana Amin Budi Hardjono

met Gus Aad at the Rumah Cinta (House of Love) forum. The Rumah Cinta community has since expanded to many regions, and at that time, K.H. Maulana Amin Budi Hardjono was invited to teach Sufi dance across various locations. Kyai Budi remains the sole pioneer of the development and dissemination of Sufi dance in Indonesia. Its continued existence is evident in the enthusiastic reception it receives from audiences at public religious gatherings (pengajian).

The Symbolic Meaning of Sufi Dance: A Semiotic Analysis Based on Roland Barthes

Sufi dance, in its various forms across the Islamic world, is not merely a performance art but a profound expression of spirituality. It has become an essential element of both religious and cultural expression. Yet, beneath its dynamic movements and captivating rhythms lies a layered system of symbolic meanings that often remain unspoken. To uncover these hidden meanings, Roland Barthes’ semiotic approach serves as a highly effective analytical tool. By employing the concepts of sign, denotation–connotation, and myth, Barthes enables us to interpret Sufi dance not only as an art form but as a cultural text rich with meaning.

The term semiotics derives from the Greek word semeion, meaning “sign.” According to Kaelan, the exploration of semiotics as a method of study across various academic disciplines is made possible by the tendency to perceive diverse forms of social discourse as linguistic phenomena. In other words, language functions as a model within different forms of social discourse. From a semiotic perspective, if all social practices are regarded as linguistic phenomena, then they may also be viewed as signs. This is possible because the concept of “sign” itself is broad and inclusive (Kaelan, 2009:262).

In general, Van Zoest, as cited in Rahayu S. Hidayat, asserts that semiotics is the study of signs, their use, and all matters related to them. Signs function as tools for

navigating the world, for interacting among humans, and for coexisting with others. Thus, the purpose of semiotics is to investigate the production and consumption of meanings embedded within signs.

Terminologically, semiotics can be identified as the study of a broad range of objects, events, and cultural phenomena as signs. Although often defined as the study of signs, semiotics is essentially an inquiry into codes—systems that allow us to perceive certain entities as signs or as meaningful. Signs are the foundation of all communication, as noted by communication scholar Littlejohn in his well-known work *Theories on Human Behaviour* (1996). According to Littlejohn, humans, through signs, can communicate with one another, and there is a vast array of things in the world that can be communicated.

Umberto Eco, another prominent semiotician, distinguishes between two types of semiotics: the semiotics of communication and the semiotics of signification. The semiotics of communication emphasizes theories on the production of signs, one of which assumes the presence of six factors in communication—sender, receiver, code or sign system, message, communication channel, and referent. In contrast, the semiotics of signification does not concern itself with communicative intent. Rather, it focuses on the understanding of a sign, prioritizing the cognitive process in the sign's reception over the process of its production.

1. Sufi Dance as a System of Signs

Roland Barthes further developed Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas, arguing that a system of signs reflects certain assumptions held by society at a particular time. While Saussure employed the terms signifier and signified in relation to symbols or texts within a message, Barthes used the concepts of denotation and connotation to describe the different levels of meaning (Kurniawan, 2007:163). Barthes elaborated extensively on what is often referred to as the "second-order signification system," which is constructed upon an already existing system. Literature

serves as a clear example of this second-order signification, built upon language as the primary system. Barthes referred to this second system as connotative, which, in his work *Mythologies*, he clearly distinguished from the denotative or first-order signification system. Through his studies, Barthes created a conceptual map illustrating how signs operate.

According to Barthes, all forms of culture are systems of signs composed of the signifiant (signifier) and the signifié (signified). In the context of Sufi dance, bodily movements function as the signifiant, while their embedded spiritual meaning constitutes the signifié. For example, the bowing motion in Sufi dance is not merely a physical act but a symbolic gesture of humility before God. This movement also symbolizes the acceptance of the Divine breath and the acknowledgment of Allah's greatness. The act of raising one's hands toward the sky is not solely an aesthetic expression but signifies prayer, longing for God, and recognition of His majesty. Likewise, the circular floor patterns are not accidental; the circle represents the unity of the ummah, harmony, and the rotation of the universe in submission to the Creator. In Sufi tradition, the circle reflects the concepts of tawhid (unity with God) and fana (self-annihilation in Divine love). Thus, every element of Sufi dance functions as a sign that conveys profound symbolic messages.

2. Denotation and Connotation in Dance Movements

Barthes distinguished between denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (symbolic or ideological meaning). Denotatively, the movements in Sufi dance may be perceived as ordinary physical actions—standing, bowing, spinning. However, connotatively, these movements carry much deeper meanings. The act of spinning in Sufi dance, for instance, is denotatively a form of coordinated group movement, but connotatively it represents *dhikr jahr*—the collective recitation of God's name.

Circular movements and formations, in denotative terms, are simply choreographic floor patterns, yet connotatively they symbolize the spiritual journey (suluk) toward God and unity with the cosmos. This connotation is shaped by religious context, oral traditions, and community values that transmit the dance as an act of worship. However, for general audiences or younger generations unfamiliar with its context, the dance may appear simply as a “cool” or “viral” performance, devoid of its deeper meaning. This results in a decontextualization of meaning, in which its spiritual connotation is replaced by an entertainment-oriented one.

The movement vocabulary of Sufi dance is relatively easy to recall, as its core motion is spinning. The sequence of movements also embodies Islamic values: (1) The dance begins with the performer walking with both palms placed over the chest—the right hand over the left—symbolizing self-restraint and the acknowledgment that all existence has a beginning. This gesture represents total surrender to the One who is the First Cause, affirming that we exist because of Him and that our life’s journey is undertaken for Him. (2) During the dance, the right palm faces upward, signifying the constant reception of divine grace or blessings from Allah (hablum minallah). (3) The left palm faces downward, reminding humans to extend love and compassion to all of God’s creation (hablum minannas). These two hand positions express the inseparable relationship between one’s connection with God and with fellow human beings. A Muslim is not only required to maintain a harmonious relationship with God but also with other human beings.

3. Cultural Myth: Sufi Dance as a Symbol of Identity

One of Barthes’ most influential concepts is myth—the way society transforms cultural values into truths that appear natural. In the context of Nusantara Sufi dance, what was once a form of ritual and dhikr has now evolved into a cultural

myth representing a peaceful, tolerant, and acculturated form of Indonesian Islam. In national narratives, this dance is often used to convey messages about Islam that is non-radical, but rather imbued with love, discipline, and beauty. This process is a form of mythologization: values of Sufism—such as love, patience, and unity—are automatically attached to the dance, as if they are the inherent qualities of Indonesian Islam.

However, this myth also carries certain risks. When Sufi dance is regarded as an automatic representation of the “true” Islam, other religious expressions that differ from it may become marginalized. Moreover, such a myth can obscure the realities of commercialization and the potential erosion of spirituality in the practice of the dance itself.

Sufi Dance in the Context of Indonesian Islamic Culture: Aesthetics and Spirituality

Art within the inner dimension of Islamic teachings and its spirituality can be discovered and practiced by Muslim artists, whose task is to create forms, objects, and contemporary manifestations of Islamic art. In essence, art serves as a witness to the manifestation of the One and its harmony influences the liberation of the soul—freeing humans from servitude to the many and allowing them to experience the indescribable joy of closeness to the Divine (Nasr, 1993). Sufi dance, developed by Jalaluddin Rumi, has been used as a medium to seek peace and love between humans and their Creator. In Turkey, Sufi dance is known as the Mevlevi Sema Ceremony, which in Arabic means “listening,” but in a broader sense refers to joyful whirling to the accompaniment of melodies, following the direction of the universe or counterclockwise (Nugroho, 2021). Sufi dance is regarded as a form of self-meditation closely linked to the Sufi dimension of Islamic teachings. This is grounded in the symbolic meanings embedded in the clothing and movements of the dancers.

The general public often has limited knowledge about the activities of the Sufis. Typically, they are only familiar with the Sufi as a group of people whose lives are largely devoted to drawing closer to God through acts of worship, often neglecting or disregarding worldly concerns. From the author's perspective, the mystical tradition embodied in this form of dance has the potential to integrate the public's perspective on the arts (aesthetics) with the broader cultural (spiritual) context. Sufism, as the mystical tradition of Islam, has long maintained a close relationship with various forms of artistic expression, including music, poetry, and visual art. This interaction reflects the rich spiritual dimension of Sufi practice, in which art serves not merely as an aesthetic expression but also as a means of deepening mystical experience and spiritual reflection (Errata, 2020).

The aesthetics of Sufi dance are not solely concerned with visual beauty but represent a harmonious blend of rhythm, balance, discipline, and emotional expression, creating a profound artistic experience. Movements such as crossing the arms over the chest and clasping the shoulders, bowing the head in a motion resembling *ruku'*, lowering the hands to the navel to form the shape of a heart, raising the right hand upward while lowering the left hand downward, spinning counterclockwise, and bowing again after dancing—within the Sufi context—are not only visually captivating but also deeply rooted in spiritual philosophy. Thus, the aesthetics of Sufi dance transcend mere “pleasing appearance,” embodying meaningful beauty in which every movement becomes a fusion of art, rhythm, and noble values infused with spiritual significance.

The process embodied in Sufi dance symbolizes the spiritual journey of humankind, utilizing intellect and love in the pursuit of perfection. This is why whirling became a defining characteristic of the Sufi dance developed by Jalaluddin Rumi. Sufi dance was never created with mere visual appeal in mind; its primary aim is to attain an

abstract dimension that can guide one toward the divine realm (Rusmala et al., 2019).

As explained by several majelis dakwah (Islamic preaching assemblies) interviewed by the author during events led by K.H. Amin Maulana Budi Hardjono, the majority of the audience's attention becomes fixed on the stage when Sufi dance is performed. Many even join in chanting shalawat while enjoying the movements, unconsciously swaying their heads as if engaged in dhikr. Their initial interest often transforms into awe as the Sufi dancer whirls on a single axis, increasing speed over time.

The performance typically begins with a sermon on the theme of death. This reflects K.H. Amin Maulana Budi Hardjono's intention to focus the audience's minds on the subject of mortality. The sermon's theme correlates with the props used by the Sufi dancer—specifically the *sikke* (a tall felt hat) worn by the dancer, which symbolizes a gravestone or *batu nisan*.

Thus, despite initial differences in the reception of religious experiences expressed through dance, some scholars and Muslim communities accept dance as a legitimate medium for drawing closer to God, while others remain more cautious about its implications. The integration of music and dance in Sufi practice not only offers an aesthetic experience but also enriches the journey toward transcendental awareness and a deeper understanding of the spiritual meaning of human life.

Teaching Strategies for Sufi Dance in Preserving Aesthetic Values and Spiritual Meaning

Sufi dance, as an artistic expression rooted in the mystical tradition of Islam, holds a unique position in the context of arts education in the Indonesian archipelago. It is not merely a visually captivating performance, but a medium of worship, spiritual outreach (*dakwah*), and the cultivation of moral and spiritual character. Historically, Sufi dance has served as a means of conveying *tasawwuf* values such as humility, patience, love for God, and the

unity of the ummah through coordinated and deeply meaningful bodily expressions. However, in the modern era, Sufi dance faces significant challenges: the degradation of its spiritual essence due to commercialization, decontextualization, and the dominance of superficial aesthetics. Young generations often encounter Sufi dance as viral content on social media without understanding that every movement is a form of dhikr and devotion. In the educational context, this phenomenon highlights the need for holistic teaching strategies—approaches that not only impart movement techniques but also revive the aesthetic and spiritual values behind them. Without appropriate strategies, Sufi dance risks losing its identity as a living cultural heritage and becoming merely an empty spectacle devoid of meaning.

One key strategy in teaching Sufi dance is the integration of aesthetic and spiritual values into the arts education curriculum. To date, arts instruction in schools often emphasizes technical aspects such as movement accuracy, spatial formations, and performance discipline. However, the dimensions of meaning, historical context, and religious values are frequently overlooked. As a result, students may be able to perform the dance without understanding why they dance. An effective pedagogical strategy should integrate three domains: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. Teachers can begin by facilitating discussions on the dance's history, the tasawwuf teachings that underpin it, and the symbolic meaning of each movement. Students should be guided to understand that clapping is not merely for rhythm but symbolizes dhikr jahr (audible remembrance of God), and sitting cross-legged represents humility before the Divine. In this way, the learning process becomes a holistic experience in which body, mind, and soul are simultaneously engaged.

The theory of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) emphasizes that knowledge is more meaningful when connected to learners' real lives and cultural backgrounds. This approach is particularly relevant in

teaching Sufi dance. Teachers can involve students in visits to Sufi dance communities, invite religious scholars or dance instructors to share their insights, or present recordings of ritual performances. By directly engaging with cultural and spiritual contexts, students do not merely learn the movements but also internalize their significance. Furthermore, a multisensory approach—engaging sight, hearing, movement, and emotion—is highly effective in Sufi dance instruction. Students should not only watch or imitate but also listen to dhikr chants, feel the rhythm, and reflect on their inner experiences during the dance. For instance, students may contemplate the meaning of lyrics such as “Allah, Allah, light of the heart” not just as words, but as expressions of spiritual longing.

Within Vygotsky's theoretical framework, the teacher is not merely an instructor but a cultural mediator who helps students construct knowledge through social interaction. In the context of Sufi dance education, the teacher plays a crucial role as a bridge between tradition and the younger generation. A teacher who understands tasawwuf values and the historical context of the dance can deliver lessons more profoundly—not only as a movement instructor but also as a spiritual and cultural guide. Consequently, there is a need for comprehensive teacher training in the arts, encompassing not only technical mastery of the dance but also knowledge of Islamic teachings, the philosophy of tasawwuf, and pedagogical approaches that support values-based learning.

An effective teaching strategy for Sufi dance is not merely about preserving the movements, but about safeguarding the soul of the dance itself. When students are able not only to perform the dance but also to experience *khushū'* (reverent humility), understand its meaning, and appreciate its spiritual values, Sufi dance succeeds as a holistic medium of education. This reflects the true power of art—it shapes not only the body but also character, identity, and faith. Through holistic, contextual, and values-

based teaching strategies, Sufi dance can remain a source of inspiration, education, and spiritual tranquility for the younger generation amid the turbulence of modern life. Cultural preservation is not simply about maintaining form but about reviving meaning—and in this regard, arts education plays an irreplaceable role.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Sufi dance, within the context of Indonesian Islamic culture, represents a unique and richly meaningful form of expression in which aesthetics and spirituality do not stand apart but are seamlessly integrated into a living artistic tradition. Employing Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, this research reveals that Sufi dance is not merely an art performance, but a cultural text saturated with signs, connotations, and myths. Every bodily movement, the dancers' floor patterns, the musical rhythms, and the recited lyrics constitute a system of signs conveying spiritual, philosophical, and collective identity messages within the Indonesian Muslim community.

One of the main findings of this study is that Sufi dance functions as a symbolic communication system, where the body serves as the medium and movement as the language. In Barthes' theoretical framework, each movement in the dance—such as raising the hands upward, spinning, or bowing—is not a neutral physical action but a sign composed of the signifier (signifiant) and the signified (signifié). For example, rotational movements in the Saman dance are, at the level of the signifier, a bodily gesture, but at the level of the signified, they represent the spiritual journey (sulūk) towards God. Thus, Sufi dance becomes a form of moving dhikr, in which the body is used as an instrument of worship.

Further, the denotative–connotative analysis shows a layered meaning that distinguishes the physical display from its culturally constructed significance. Denotatively, Sufi dance movements may be perceived as coordinated, aesthetically

pleasing bodily actions. Connotatively, however, they carry profound spiritual meanings, such as humility, unity of the ummah, and submission to Allah. Unfortunately, in contemporary contexts, many audiences—particularly younger generations—perceive the dance primarily at the denotative level, as visually engaging entertainment, without comprehending the deeper spiritual connotations. This indicates a process of decontextualization, whereby the mystical dimension of Sufi dance is reduced to mere spectacle.

Barthes' concept of myth proves highly relevant in this case. Sufi dance has undergone a process of mythologization within Indonesian society. It is no longer understood solely as a ritual of dhikr, but has become a symbolic marker of Indonesian Islam—peaceful, tolerant, and accommodative of cultural diversity. Within national narratives, Sufi dance is frequently used to convey the message that Islam in Indonesia is a religion of beauty, love, and non-radicalism. However, this myth also carries risks. When Sufi dance is perceived as the automatic representation of the “true” Islam, other forms of religious expression risk marginalization. Moreover, the myth can obscure the reality that many contemporary performances of Sufi dance are carried out without devotional intent, without understanding of its meaning, and without ritual context.

Despite the tension between aesthetics and spirituality, the two are not necessarily in conflict. In many instances, aesthetics serves as a bridge to spirituality. The beauty of movement, the harmony of sound, and the discipline of the dancers can attract public interest—especially among the younger generation—and provide an entry point to explore the deeper meanings behind each gesture. In the context of cultural dakwah, Sufi dance becomes a highly effective medium, as it invites engagement through sensory and emotional experience rather than didactic instruction.

Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge for the preservation and development of Sufi dance

in the future: 1) Strengthening the spiritual context in Sufi dance training programs—both formal and informal—by incorporating tasawwuf values into the curriculum. Dancers should be taught not only the movements but also the symbolic meanings they embody, with niyyah (intention) as worship instilled from the outset. 2) Providing contextual framing for performances—whether in religious events or cultural festivals—by including introductory narratives that explain the spiritual background of the dance. This helps audiences appreciate the performance as an

expression of faith rather than mere entertainment. 3) Encouraging interdisciplinary research that integrates anthropology, sociology, performance studies, and religious studies to develop a holistic understanding of Sufi dance dynamics. Barthes' semiotic approach, as employed in this study, can be further expanded by incorporating local theoretical perspectives and culturally specific contexts. Through these measures, Sufi dance can continue to thrive not only as an artistic form but as a living embodiment of spiritual and cultural heritage in Indonesia.

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