



Controversy and Voluntarism Among the Elite: An Ethnographic Study of the Sufi Community in Cibingbin, Indonesia

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Abstract: This article explores the intricate dynamics among Sufi elites in Cibingbin, highlighting the significant tensions within this distinctive group. The Sufi community is deeply divided, engaging in intense debates and frequent confrontations with each other. Central to these disputes are issues surrounding the Nasab dialectics, an ideology associated with the *habaib* that stresses the concept of voluntarism among the Sufi elite. These internal debates are most intense between the *habaib* faction, known as Kanzus Sholawat Cibingbin, and the local religious authorities, referred to as Kyai Kampung. As each group digs in and solidifies their doctrinal positions, the struggle for dominance in the public sphere becomes more pronounced. This phenomenon, which aligns with Habermas's theories regarding the legitimacy of power in public spaces, has unexpectedly fueled the momentum of the Laskar Walisongo movement. Despite the apparent weakening of the *habaib*'s defensive stance, both the *habaib* and the Kyai Kampung have maintained considerable local influence. The ongoing power struggle highlights the complex interplay between belief, influence and control within this segment of the Sufi community. Ultimately, they have made public spaces an arena not just for collective imagery, but also the most vital part of the organisation's sustainability or spirit.

Keywords: controversy, voluntarism, sufi, community, public spaces

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A. Introduction

All individuals require a platform for self-expression. This platform facilitates dialogue across generations or within groups, showcasing their autonomy by fostering open discussions in public arenas. This freedom enables people to share and evolve ideas that contribute to widespread community development. Additionally, they can actively defend their presence on various social media channels such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, and through private or supportive WhatsApp groups. Sufi groups, in particular, are proactive in countering criticism from various quarters. The proliferation of technology and an overload of information often deepen societal divisions, sparking debates.

Within the Sufi community, there are two distinct factions: one associated with the Musryid group of the *habib* (Nasab), and the other with the *sanad* lineage (Kyai Kampung). Both are pivotal in shaping the dynamics of the movement. Conflict began when the indigenous group, a term still contested, reacted to the *Habib* group's criticism or sarcastic remarks towards the *Kyai Kampung*, intensifying the discourse and leading to broader polemics. This analysis focuses on the Sufi movement's response to the current charged atmosphere.

The Sufi movement in Cibingbin Kuningan utilises both virtual and physical public spaces to rally support or assert dominance. These spaces are not simply theoretical constructs for legitimising broader scholarly arguments, but are also arenas for presenting tangible societal facts. "Public Space" a concept popularised by Habermas, serves as a vital framework for scholars, encompassing social and political dimensions and acting as a field for mobilisation and expression for the Sufi community.

In social contexts, public spaces allow individuals to freely engage, share information, debate, and address collective interests on an equitable basis. Habermas's concept of the Public Domain underscore the use of public spaces for engaging in normative discussions and debates based on rational and intellectual discourse, crucial for the exercise of state power (Asadnezhad et al., 2021).

In these spaces, Sufi groups actively participate in value-driven debates that transcend mere discussion. They are democratic arenas where everyone can freely express their views and access information equally. Ideally, these spaces should be free from monopolies or domination by any group, although in practice there can be reluctance to challenge prevailing opinions and a tendency to feign allegiance amidst internal and hidden disputes. According to Efendi (2017), there are elite groups that effectively manage societal situations through established sets of values, norms, and

cultural conditions. Shore, as the proponent of elites from an anthropological perspective, firmly asserts that "elites can only be understood meaningfully within the context of their broader historical narrative; elites possess a diachronic perspective, akin to culture, as a dynamic process rather than fixed or bound entities." (Cris Shore, 2002). Elites are not monolithic; they consist of individuals or groups with diverse backgrounds and followers (Keller, 1995).

These dynamics led the authors to explore and interpret Habermas's ideas on Public Space as they pertain to the Sufi Community in Cibingbin, particularly in the context of digital media and the controversies surrounding nasab and sanad. What are nasab and sanad in this issue? Nasab, as understood in online debates, refers to a lineage; these habibs claim descent from the noble Prophet Muhammad. However, doubts about the Nasab lineage connected to Prophet Muhammad have increasingly emerged due to narratives used by some habibs that starkly contrast with the morals of the Prophet, such as the use of words such as "dog" and "underling," and other provocative actions. Consequently, KH Imaduddin Usman authored a book entitled *"Al-Fikrah Al-Nahdliyyah Fi Usul Wa Al-Furu' Ahl Sunnah Wal-Jamaah*, which explicitly states the severance of the habibs' lineage in Indonesia through the Ubaidillah line (Usman, 2024).

From here, the turmoil escalated, with the participation of the Laskar Walisongo movement, spurred by allegations of certain habibs claiming that even the Wali Songo's lineage to the Prophet Muhammad was severed.

B. Methods

Ethnography of the Sufi Community

Ethnography serves as a research methodology that immerses the researcher in the environment of the subjects under study. Its purpose is to comprehend cultural behaviours within a community and the social context within a society (Hidayah, 2012).

Digital knowledge sources have become an essential reference for modern society in exploring current phenomena and debates. Through digital networks, performance, and relational communication, this usage not only reflects the dynamics of digital media, but has also become an integral part of research in the fields of social sciences, history, and anthropology related to the transformation from the past to the present. In the digital era, or metaverse, new trends often emerge in society and can be studied through internet-based ethnographic research (netnography) (Kozinets, 2013).

The authors directly engaged with the Kanzus Sholawat Cibingbin community, previously known as the Al-Hikam Community. By actively participating in the community's activities, particularly the Al-Hikam study sessions led by KH. Asep Saefuddin Jalaluddin, S.Pd.I, the chairman of Kanzus Sholawat and a teacher of the book *Al-Hikam* by Sheikh Ibn Athaillah Asy-Syakandari, the author constructed a life history framework. These sessions, held every Saturday from 16:00 to 17:30, included Sholawat recitations followed by religious lectures, which were recorded and utilised as research material. The author aimed to merge ethnographic methods, focusing on cognitive aspects, by categorising Syadiliyah community activities. This approach strengthens the qualitative method in understanding community life phenomena and human behaviours.

The data collected from informants were divided into two parts; the emic approach, reflecting the cultural group members' perspectives, including Mursyid, local elites, tarekat followers, Cibingbin community members, and mosque caretakers; and the etic approach, involving interpretations of cultural experiences. Additionally, the author joined WhatsApp groups such as Kanzus Sholawat Cibingbin, Kaliwonan, Al Hikam, Religious Tourism and Tadabbur Alam, and Facebook groups such as Kanzus Sholawat Community and Laskar Walisongo Community.

The level of religiosity in the Cibingbin community is notably high, evidenced by the presence of 69 small mosques and four main mosques, including Al-Anwar Mosque, Al-Barokah Mosque, Al-Istiqomah Mosque, and Al-Istianah Mosque. Kanzus Sholawat activities are primarily concentrated in Al-Anwar Mosque, situated in the village centre near the sub-district office of Cibingbin village.

Data Collection Techniques

To gather essential data concerning the theme of Sufi Contestation in Public Space (An Ethnographic Study of the Sufi Community in Cibingbin), observation and in-depth interviews with predetermined informants were essential. Spreadley (1980) advises researchers to select informants capable of participating in the events under investigation to ensure accurate data collection regarding their life dynamics. This study aims not for external validity but for an understanding of a specific reality within its context. Employing multi-level analysis, the study utilizes various qualitative data collection methods, including observation, in-depth interviews, documentation studies, and group discussions related to the collected data (Wilson et al., 2016).

The compiled data are thematically organized based on the obtained information, involving sorting relevant data related to the research problem. The researcher not only engages directly with the community but also delves into the subjects' consciousness, contemplating their thoughts and desires. All these activities aim towards understanding intentionality, which is influenced by culture. The researcher also examines primary sources that shape the subjects' thoughts, with the primary reference for the Al-Hikam community being the classical book *Al Hikam* by Sheikh Ibn Athaillah Asy-Sakandari.

C. Results and Discussion

The Discourse of the Local Sufi

Elite An attempt is made to delve into the concept of local elites, particularly in the literature of Habermas, and to correlate it with the elite groups in Java (referred to as the bourgeoisie). In the Western paradigm, the study of elites has gained significant meaning compared to the potential of local elites in our country whose existence is highly regarded. According to Bowman and Paige (1979), 250 theses and dissertations in leading universities in the United States examine the theme of elites from various perspectives. In addition, in Indonesia elites have drawn attention because they are seen as "people in positions of authority. The "life histories of the leaders" question who the "great people" are, commonly referring to them as *wong gede* to distinguish them from *wong cilik* or common people. The term elite was used in the seventeenth century to describe something that possessed very good, special or with perfect qualities. The term expanded to refer to superior social groups, such as the military class or the noble class, which can also be referred to as *priyayi* and conglomerate levels (Bottomore, 2006).

Efendi's (2017) study indicates that in-depth research on elites is still considered "eccentric" and rarely conducted within the Indonesian research tradition. Comprehensive literature on this topic is very limited, leading to a lack of references on elites. Most contributions come from Western researchers, such as van Neil's book *The Emergence of the Modern Indonesian Elite* (1960), which has been translated, and Emerson's work *Indonesia's Elite: Political Culture and Cultural Politics*. Additionally, previous writings by the anthropologist Geertz on *The Religion of Java* also discuss the class dichotomy of *abangan*, *santri* and *priyayi* in Javanese society (Geertz, 1960).

Haryanto (2022) states that the term elite "always refers to someone or a group with certain advantages, where the inherent excellence allows them to play an

influential role in certain aspects of life." The bourgeoisie is highly focused on profit, operating under the principle of *vox populi, vox argentum*, meaning the voice of the people is the sound of falling coins. Unlike the elite, the bourgeoisie did not originate from the Nusantara paradigm, but is closely related to bourgeois interests due to the tumult caused by colonialism and imperialism over the past three and a half centuries. The emergence of the bourgeoisie is relatively positioned with the rapid growth of trade, which introduced the Dutch bourgeoisie, native bourgeoisie and Chinese bourgeoisie.

Historically, Habermas's views first appeared in the 17th century in Europe, addressing the emergence of the bourgeoisie in public space together with the development of capitalism. The proto-capitalist era gave birth to a new class, the bourgeoisie. Beyond regular trade, the bourgeoisie built capitalist production within a seminal public space ; the bourgeois public space was occupied by the commercial class, consisting of traders and professionals (Johnson, 2020).

Contrary to Kant, whose primary elements of public space are "critical, rational, and free debate, Habermas defines it as "critical, rational, and free opinions" (Gardiner, 2004). Interestingly, unlike Kant and Habermas, Dewey accepts the idea that civilisations outside the West can produce unique public spaces. In his discourse, the idea of public space is not related to modern or traditional societies; any society, as long as it is a form of collectivity, can have public space.

Therefore, both the elite and the bourgeoisie are high-stratum groups from the Javanese perspective. They also complement the variety of issues exploited by academics, politicians, and Sufi groups seeking change or power interests and mass mobilisation. Unlike political or academic groups, Sufis wish that those who are elite or bourgeois must have a voluntary spirit in the form of rewards or blessings. Even tranquility, peace, and happiness, referred to as "a life full of blessings".

The Inception of the Sufi Hikam Movement

A significant landmark in the Sufi movement began with the formation of a group consisting of local residents as participants, including *kyai kampung*, civil servants, village officials, teachers, entrepreneurs, and the management of Al-Anwar Mosque in Cibingbin. A charismatic *kyai*, KH Asep Saefuddin Jalaluddin, S.Pd.I., the founder of the Bani Syahir Islamic Boarding School, served as the teacher of the Book of al-Hikam by Sheikh Ibn Athaillah Asy-Syakandari. This Sufi group, calling themselves the Al-Hikam community, regularly held religious study groups and discussions every Saturday night, starting at 8:00 PM. These gatherings took place

from 2017 to 2021, initially held at Al-Anwar Mosque in Cibingbin, then moving from one mosque to another within the Cibingbin district. The aim was to raise awareness among the people of Cibingbin about the importance of learning Sufism through the study of al-Hikam. Through a long journey, the Hikam Sufis infiltrated and became the precursors to the formation of a larger community, namely Kanzus Sholawat Cibingbin.

The Movement of the Elite in the Kanzus Sholawat Community

Initially, one of the members of the Al-Hikam Community, before becoming involved in the Kanzus Sholawat Cibingbin Movement, was actively participating in and regularly attending the study sessions. Over time, a change occurred after H. Dudung, Nazar Shofana, and others became familiar with Kanzus Sholawat based in Pekalongan. Their closeness to Habib Maulana Lutfhi, demonstrated through various agendas and photos with Mursyid Habib Maulana Lutfhi, earned him the title “Ring 1”.

Figure 1

Photos with Mursyid Habib Maulana Lutfhi



Initially, Ring 1 did not affect the routine agenda of Saturday night studies of the Book of al-Hikam, but H. Dudung, as an elite member, attracted the attention of the people of Cibingbin, expanding its influence to people who were not members of Al-Hikam. The formation of a pilgrimage committee, which culminated in the Kanzus Sholawat study on Friday Kaliwon, is one of the agendas that gained much interest. Three or four buses departed for Pekalongan, with a pilgrimage route to various Wali graves, including the spiritual journey to the tombs of Wali Agung Sheikh Maulana Muhibbat Kuningan, Habib Thoha Jati Seeng Ciledug, Cirebon and Sheikh Sharif Hidayatullah Gunung Djati Cirebon; the grave of Habib Ali Bin Hasyim Bin Yahya; and the tomb of Wali Agung Habib Hasyim bin Umar Bin Yahya.

They pledged allegiance to the Thoriqoh Syadiliyah and performed *dhikr* at Kanzus Sholawat Pekalongan. On the way back, they briefly stopped at the traditional Batik Sentono Market, continued with recreation at Kencana Beach in Pemalang, made a pilgrimage to the tomb of Wali Agung Sheikh Maulana Syamsudin and the grave of Wali Agung Habib Muhammad bin Thohir Al-Hadad, before returning.

Laskar Walisongo Resistance

The movement of the Kyai Kampung group using the name of Laskar Walisongo began with the emergence of a massive movement by local Kyai, with rumors of Yemeni agents successfully creating more than 100 fake graves in all corners of the archipelago. These rumours were strengthened by numerous digital spaces such as TikTok, YouTube and Facebook, which filled with lectures by the charismatic scholars KH Imaduddin and Gus Abbas from Buntet Islamic Boarding School.

At the same time, on the local scene, the presence of the Local Elite of Kanzus Sholawat Cibingbin contributed significantly to the transformation of NU religious practices. For example, *Debaan, Berjanjen*, a pesantren tradition deeply rooted in the Cibingbin-Kuningan community, began to transform into Simtudduror, which is widely used by the Kanzus Sholawat Cibingbin Community and the lovers of Habib in the Rosulullah Assembly Community.

During the dialectic questioning of the termination of Habib's Nasab, followed by issues of alleged historical distortion, which continued to impact the existence of the Kanzus Sholawat Cibingbin community. In the Laskar Walisongo community, historical distortion is shown by the quoting of various writings and YouTube videos circulating on the theme of historical distortion. For example, the alleged fake graves, referred to as Gus Abbas, are scattered throughout the archipelago with the affiliation of bin "Anu", which is interpreted as *bin Yahya*, and has become a topic of discussion in the community. According to one member of the Asma Duit Community (local community), "if talking about Nasab is not their expertise, but when talking about the falsification of graves, it's easy to trace, how many graves are named bin Yahya.

An important notion is that "civilization is built with common sense and knowledge, whoever rejects both will become the trash of civilization!" (Admin, 2024). They also consider arrogance over nasab used to change fate and marginalise the indigenous people. For example, in a writing that mentions various forms of arrogance:

- 1) Excessive pride in their nasab connected to the Prophet Muhammad.
- 2) Many practices of racism in various lectures by the habib due to their noble lineage. This is also evident in the procedures for marriage based on kafa'ah, or equality of racial status. Their daughters must marry someone of the same status, i.e., a descendant of the Prophet, while for men, they are free to marry anyone.
- 3) The claim that the male lineage is traced back to Sayyidina Husein bin Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. However, there is a vague and even seemingly erroneous understanding, making it easy to be declared false.
- 4) Many defences for the family of the Prophet, even brandishing swords during lectures, and there are also many videos with narratives of insults, abuse, and even persecution against the indigenous people.
- 5) Some use moderate methods, which actually become a "hostage" for NU itself (Admin, 2024).

Although covert, this movement is perceived as an underground endeavour. Their efforts are viewed as a "consciousness movement" among figures in Cibingbin, particularly among the owners of Islamic boarding schools (Pondok Pesantren). For instance, the Laskar Walisongo community with Kyai Kampung aim to enhance awareness among leaders such as Kyai Shofi from the Sabilun Najah Islamic boarding school in Cibingbin. However, this awareness campaign is not aimed at dismantling the Sufi Movement of Kanzus Sholawat, but its impact extends to the compliance of the devotees, whose trust has been eroded by the brutal narratives circulating on social media platforms. The current situation is characterised by contestation between the *Habaib* groups led by H Dudung and the groups of local kyai in the Laskar Walisongo Movement.

The leader of Laskar Walisongo (Gus Abbas) stated that the question of whether their lineage is connected to the Prophet Muhammad will not undermine the nobility of the character of the *Habaib*. However, on the other hand, there have been vehement statements regarding the alleged historical distortion originating from the proliferation of fake graves purportedly belonging to the descendants of the habib sparking intense debates.

Controversies do not always have negative connotations, as they can also function as educational platforms (Devrièsère, 2020). Fostering efforts within communities for improved cohabitation, the Kanzus Sholawat Community finds itself divided. Moreover, discord arises as the Ziarah congregation opposes the direct path to Kanzus Sholawat, while KH Asep favours visiting the tombs of Wali Sunan Gunung Djati in Cirebon and other saints, as traditionally scheduled every Friday Kaliwon.

The influence of KH Asep in Cibingbin is significant, to the extent that a prospective Village Chief named H Danto sought his blessing and enlisted him as a supporter, which was also integrated into the campaign and banners. Controversies among local elites, especially religious leaders and businessmen close to the central elite, are inevitable.

However, a surprising development occurred. KH Asep, who had been silent about lineage (Nasab) up to that point, responded to the movement with the Local Walisongo Warriors opposing the supporters of *Habaib* from Rabithoh Baalawi. In his sermon the people of Cibingbin were urged to trust the scholars of the past; he stated, "We trust the scholars of the past more than the scholars of today. Who can match the piety of Sheikh Nawawi Al-Bantani? The righteousness of Yasim Al Fadani? Who can match the righteousness of Sayyid Murtadha Al Jabiri who declared that Sayyid Baalawi has a connection with the great Prophet Muhammad SAW? Therefore, do not blindly follow, do not be deceived, as it may diminish our love for the Prophet and our love for the descendants of the Prophet SAW." Similarly, Pesantren Sabilun Najah still believes in or relies on the lineage of Habib or Kanzus Sholawat, as seen in the Kaliwonan Pilgrimage poster which still features Al-Quthb Al Habib Thoha Bin Hasan Bin Yahya.

This has become one of the controversies regarding the authenticity of the tomb using the name Bin Yahya. Nevertheless, recent facts when the leadership of the Islamic boarding school posted the theme "No *habaibs* have contributed to Indonesia" in the Al-Anwar Mosque Committee Group consisting of mosque officials and H. Dudung as ring 1 in the Kanzus Sholawat Community. Although no response was directed to Kyai Shofi, it was enough to warn of the waning devotion of the muhibbin (lovers of the *habaibs*). Some findings point to this contestation, showing that no movement is purely driven without other factors such as economic or political contestation. In essence, the existence of the elites is influenced by economic contestation, with the two elites competing for influence and positions in Cibingbin. Rumours about the management of KBIH (Regional Hajj Implementing Body) have also played a role in the conflict.

Therefore, there is no empty space; the spirit of volunteering among the followers of this community has been eliminated. Initially, volunteering was a significant driver, as learned from the Sufi community, with Sufi understanding emphasising the spirit of volunteering. It is this solidarity among Muslims that determines the strength of a community.

The anthropologist Alatas (2021) provides new insights into religious authority, particularly in Islam. His findings demonstrate the deep religiosity of leaders as they strive to unify various aspects of life and the spirit of contestation in shaping a distinct Muslim identity, especially when forming solidarity within the Muslim community (Alatas, 2021).

In Al-Hikam, wisdom number 6 states that "action is its framework, while the soul lies in its sincerity (voluntary) in that action." The muhibbin (those who love and yearn for Prophet Muhammad SAW) among the Sufis interpret the volunteer movement as "عبد from the implementation, only You we worship" (QS. Al-Fatihah: 05), meaning they expect nothing but Allah alone. A female waliyullah, Rabi'ah Al-Adawiyyah, said: "I worship You not out of fear of hell or hope for paradise. Instead, I worship You solely to glorify You".

D. Conclusion

Facts scattered about the elite among Sufis who have influence and many followers. However, the contestation in the public sphere, both in terms of facts and virtual reality, has fragmented the movement, creating intersecting forces. They colour the public space in an appealing and highly interpretable manner, even beyond previous paradigms. The selection of rural bourgeois groups affiliated with Sufism plays a vital role, with their massive movements and supporter numbers reaching hundreds or even thousands in an instant. The gathering of the masses in public space seems to be a threat to the Sufis, encouraging them to maintain neutrality in power while positioning themselves as a capable and strong local identity. Notably, many political elite groups are approaching them using polite and seemingly coercive methods.

However, all of this does not exist in an empty space, as the spirit of volunteerism among the followers of this community has been successfully eliminated. Initially, voluntarism served as the main driving force, as learned by the Sufi community. Volunteers play a crucial role in organisations. Moreover, the community emphasises a universal recipe or contingency perspective based on organisational needs rather than on volunteers.

Sufi understanding and the spirit of volunteerism are reflected in the teachings of Al-Hikam, specifically in wisdom number 06: "Action is like a framework standing upright, while its soul (spirit) lies in its sincerity (voluntarism) in the action." The Muhibbin (those who love and long for the Prophet Muhammad SAW) in the Sufi community interpret volunteerism as true worship, meaning worshipping only You,

"You alone we worship" (QS. Al-Fatihah: 05), signifying no expectation other than for Allah alone. A female waliyullah, Rabi'ah Al-Adawiyah, once said: "I do not worship You for fear of hell or for the sake of paradise, but I worship You solely to glorify You".

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