

# Analyzing Sufi Orders as Social Networks through Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory: Tasawuf in Indonesia's Digital Era

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## Abstract

*The proliferation of digital technology has had massive implications for religious practices, including tarekat (Sufi orders) in Indonesia. Drawing on concepts from Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT), this article reads tarekat as social networks, highlighting how human, non-human, and hybrid actors come together in shaping Sufi practices today. The study used an ethnographic qualitative method by conducting in-depth interviews with 45 participants, consisting of murshid, murid, and digital media administrator, selected from three major tarekat in Central Java: Qadiriyyah wa Naqsyabandiyah (QaN), Syattariyyah, and Tijaniyyah. Fieldwork was conducted among physical zawiyah as well as through virtual platforms such as WhatsApp groups, YouTube channels, and specialized websites over a period of twelve months (January–December 2024). The results show that tarekat networks are established via assemblages of human actors (murshid, murid, khalifah), non-human actors (digital platforms, wirid texts, tasbih), and hybrid mediators (livestreamed rituals and digital ijazah). The act of translation reveals how these diverse actors collaborate to remodel spiritual authority in digital spaces. This paper advances the understanding of how traditional religious organizations negotiate modernity through reconfiguring their network, providing theoretical implications for studying religion-technology intersections in Muslim contexts.*

**Keywords:** Actor-Network Theory, tarekat, Sufism, digital Islam, religious networks, Indonesia

## 1. Introduction

The twenty-first century has seen significant changes in the ways that religious communities are organized, communicated, and lived. As the country with the world's largest Muslim population of almost 230 million (about 87 percent of its total inhabitants), Indonesia serves as a rich case for exploring such transformations, especially among milieus like Sufi orders (tarekat) that have traditionally functioned through networks of intricate master-disciple relationships (Howell, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic hastened the adoption of digital technologies in religious organizations, thereby even the most conservative tarekat to turn into virtual mean to keep their spiritual connection (Slama & Barendregt, 2018).

The digital ecosystem in Indonesia is conducive for such a shift. Siswa et al. (2014) reported the total numbers of internet connection users in Indonesia; which have been estimated was 185.3 million, or 66.5–72.8% from the all populations based on DataReportal (2024). In addition, 139 million Indonesians (49.9% of the population) are social media active users, with average daily time spent

on the internet of 7 hours 22 minutes, and specifically on social media by 3 hours 8 minutes. These are significant numbers that highlight the deep and measurable digital support religious organizations have at their disposal in engaging with people spiritually.

Sufi tarekat in Indonesia have long functioned not only as religious institutions, but also as social and community organisations that promote social integration, education and socio-economic support (Bruinessen: 1992). The largest tarekat organisations are well-organised with large memberships: The Tarekat Qadiriyyah wa Naqsyabandiyah (TQN) alone has between 3–5 million active adherents throughout the archipelago, and there are 45 officially recognized tarekat combined and coordinated by the federation of Jam'iyyah Ahlith Thariqah Al-Mu'tabarah An-Nahdliyyah (JATMAN; Bruinessen, 2007). In the age of digital media and the internet, many tarekat are turning to digital outreach programs, worship services, and community activities which alters ways spiritual authority and social bonds are sustained (Zamhari & Howell 2012).

However, there appears to be little academic interest in the way tarekat communities engage with digitalization. Much of this work, however, deals with either aspects of the pre-digital Sufi networks or with patterns in digital Islam more generally and fails to theorize the convoluted relations between human actors, technological artifacts and spiritual practices that make up contemporary tarekat assemblages (Bunt, 2018). Such a lacuna is rather glaring when one acknowledges that Indonesian tarekat communities constitute a sizeable though understudied aspect of global Sufism.

The pressing need for such study is found in our lack of understanding about how traditional religious forms of authority are meeting, and being changed by, digital mediation. According to Latour (2005), social phenomena do not serve the consequences of already existing social structures; they must be followed in their trace, that is, through connections and This study therefore poses the following research questions:

1. How are human and non-human actors employed to both configure tarekat networks in Indonesia for the digital age?
2. What sort of translations do traditional Sufi practices undergo as they become mediated via the digital?
3. How does spiritual authority change in the context of digitally-mediated tarekat assemblages?

By means of a systematic implementation of Actor-Network Theory, this study offers empirical lessons on Indonesian Sufism and theoretical re-working on the research of religion-technology encounters

## **2. Review of Literature**

### **2.1. Theoretical Framework: Actor-Network Theory**

Actor-Network Theory (ANT), established especially by the works of Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law is a specific way to look at social phenomena without separating human subjects from material objects (Latour, 2005). ANT argues that agency is not located in 'autonomous' individual human actors, nor in material objects, but rather assembled and enacted within networks of human and non-human "actants" (Latour 1991), with the natural order being continuously and locally made stable through processes of "translation", where prior the heterogeneity of different elements are

enrolled into relatively stable associations (Callon 1986).

Central to ANT is the notion of "translation," that is, as Callon (1986) puts it, the manner in which actors shape and assign tasks or position themselves as necessary for network operation. Translation involves four key moments:

**Table 1: Four Moments of Translation in ANT**

Moment	Definition	Application to Tarekat
<b>Problematization</b>	Framing the issue and situating oneself as part of the solution	Murshid describes pandemic-induced spiritual dislocation as a problem in need of digital solutions
<b>Interessement</b>	Measures to fix the identities of other players	Training senior murid to recognize digital means as valid in spiritual affairs
<b>Enrollment</b>	Defining and coordinating roles	Appointment of Cyber Amirs Protocol on Virtual Bay'ah
<b>Mobilization</b>	Representatives adequately representing their constituencies	Khalifah informing his murshid about digital engagement trends

*Source: Adapted from Callon (1986) and Latour (2005)*

The concept of "obligatory passage points" (OPPs) is pertinent to the analysis of tarekat networks. OPPs are gates or gatekeepers who every other actor must go through to enact their goals, and thus, around whom control is produced within networks (Callon, 1986). In traditional tarekat formations, the murshid operates as an OPP through which there can be no spiritual transmission or line of authority (12); digital media may multiply and/or configure additional or contesting OPPs.

## 2.2. Previous Studies on Tarekat and Digital Islam

Academic analysis of Indonesian tarekat has documented their historical role as networks of spiritual transmission, political organization and social service (Bruinessen 1992). Citing sources, consolidated by van Bruinessen's seminal work, the tarekat are "chains of transmission" (silsilah) binding practitioners into the present directly to the life and teaching of the Prophet Muhammad though an uninterrupted succession of spiritual masters.

New procuratorial research has demonstrated radical changes have occurred in the functioning of Sufi orders. González (2025) coins the term "unbound zawiya and unlimited library" to conceptualize how digital constellations out-stretch the material Sufi lodge. Hakim (2025), on the other hand, chronicles the mutation of Sufistic da'wah via online manaqib exercises, while Arnel (2025) looks at the politics of piety in Sufi network formations. These studies taken together illustrate the development of what Hidayati (2022) refers to as "online Sufism"—a situation in which digital media are not add-ons or supplements available only to complement spiritual exercise, but now form an important part of it.

The wider area of digital Islam has generated much research on how Muslim communities have

adopted information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Bunt, 2018). Waheed et al. (2024) offer rigorous empirical analysis of Sufi practices via digital social media, and chronicle how the orders maintain their authenticity while broadening their reach. Asmarani and Monica (2023) explore the transnationalisation of Naqshbandī Haqqānī networks in terms of mediation, as they rose with, by and against digital media to train disciples beyond their territory well as foster a sense of community across that space.

### 2.3. Digital Infrastructure and Tarekat Adaptation

The digitization of Indonesian tarekat is an aspect of wider technological processes in the country. Table 2 reflects existing digital infrastructure data to inform tarekat network potential:

**Table 2: Indonesia's Digital Landscape (2024–2025)**

Indicator	Data	Source
<b>Total Internet Users</b>	185.3 million (66.5–72.8% penetration)	DataReportal, 2024
<b>Social Media Users</b>	139 million (49.9% of population)	We Are Social, 2024
<b>Mobile Connections</b>	353.3 million (126.8% – dual SIM common)	DataReportal, 2024
<b>Daily Internet Usage</b>	7 hours 22 minutes average	DataReportal, 2024
<b>Daily Social Media Usage</b>	3 hours 8 minutes average	DataReportal, 2024
<b>Facebook Market Share</b>	80.1%	StatCounter, 2024
<b>YouTube Market Share</b>	14.4%	StatCounter, 2024

This anti-structure allows tarekat networks to be able to sustain the communication within the archipelago (Indonesia) which broke down geographical boundaries that used to restrict how far spiritual knowledge could spread, as personal encounters were necessary.

### 2.4. Research Gap

Despite the increasing academic interest in both Indonesian Sufism and digital Islam, there are important lacunae in articulating the ways they cone into one another. The existing literature is characterized by an ethnographic specificity without theoretical finesse, or a theorising that moves to generality but loses contact with history. ANT offers a strong theoretical basis on which to span such gaps, but has been relatively underused with Islamic religious life in general and Sufi dynamics in particular (Meyer 2009). This article fills these gaps through theoretically-informed empirical analysis of how tarekat networks are formed, translated and reconfigured in the age of Indonesia's digital age

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research Design

This study is designed as a qualitative research study using ethnographic methods that are suitable for exploring complex, contextual and processual phenomena – which is at the centre of ANT analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The multi-sited ethnographic research follows network nodes that

connect physical zawiyah to digital platforms and the interphased (cfr. Marcus 1995) between both.

### 3.2. Participants and Sampling

Informants were purposively and snowbally alphabetically drawn from three big tarekat groups that are alive in Central Java, namely Qadiriyyah wa Naqsyabandiyah (TQN), Syattariyyah, and Tijaniyyah.

Table 3: Participant Demographics

Category	Number	Description
Murshid/Mursyidah	6	Spiritual masters (ages 58–82)
Khalifah	12	Regional deputies
Murid	18	Disciples of varying seniority
Digital Administrators	9	Technical and media staff
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	31 male, 14 female (ages 24–78)

### 3.3. Data Collection

Data was collected using three sources of data collection over one year (January to December 2024):

All 45 participants completed detailed interviews with semi-structured protocols. The interviews, which lasted approximately 90 min, were audio-taped with the consent of participants. Fieldwork took place in both physical (zawiyah, mosques, murshid's homes) and virtual environments (WhatsApp groups, YouTube livestreams, Zoom meetings). The researcher participated in 47 actual meetings and joined 8 WhatsApp groups with around 2400 members.

The writer of the article was conducting investigation to tarekat website, social media contents, digital ijazah certificate and printed matters analysis. This consisted of 156 YouTube videos, 342 WhatsApp messages of a religious nature and 23 digital documents.

### 3.4. Ethical Considerations

This work was approved by UNSIQ Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent. All participants were referred to under pseudonym by this project. Particular sensitivity was preserved toward unpopular spiritual material individuals deemed unsuitable for public sharing.

## 4. Combination Of Recitation And Contemplation Of The Quran

### 4.1. Network Composition: Human Actors

The tarekat networks we investigated include multiple types of human actors with differentiated functions and relations.

Murshid are believed to be at the highest level of spiritual authority, and act as a live chain going back to God through the silsilah. One TQN murshid described the nature of it like this:

“The murshid is not a teacher normally, he’s like a doctor of the soul and it’s as if each murid has different diseases of the heart and the murshid knows what medicine to give or tailor for each individual patient”.

Khalifahs are the licensed representatives who perform services, deliver sermons and lead local organizations. "With a Khalifah you have the problem of much of the guidance being lost, with people taking decisions on their own."38 By now digital communications are dictating that Khalifah should gain management over them, creating an additional intermediary level between murshid and murid. Here, one khalifa shares the transition to pandemic:

“If the government has closed the masjid, I told my khalifah: then we must find ways how to meet our murid. And the pandemic does not cause their spiritual needs to take a break.”

Members of network are predominantly murid. Digital Connectivity: A 34 Years Female Murid (F) of Tijaniyah Explain Digital connection is important to us.

"I reside in Jakarta, while my murshid is in Cirebon. Left to myself with no WhatsApp and no YouTube, I could only go perhaps twice a year. Now I feel connected daily."

Digital khalifah are a new actor group not found in the traditional tarekat. These people, who are usually young, tech-savvy murid, run websites and moderate WhatsApp groups; they take care of the transmitting equipment and curate digital content.

#### 4.2. Network Composition: Non-Human Actors

Non-human agencies became crucial for the constitution and operation of networks. In the language of ANT, digital media platforms are actants that mediate religious communication, spiritual community formation and religious authority (Latour 2005).

Table 4: Digital Platform Engagement of Major Tarekat

Tarekat/Figure	Platform	Metrics	Content Type
<b>Habib Luthfi bin Yahya (JATMAN Chairman)</b>	Instagram (@habibluthfibinyahya)	200,000+ followers	Spiritual guidance, event announcements
<b>Habib Luthfi bin Yahya</b>	Facebook	Highest engagement	Daily posts, live sessions
<b>TQN Suryalaya</b>	YouTube (@suryalayatv)	19,600 subscribers	Dhikr recordings, lectures

<b>TQN-37 Suryalaya</b>	YouTube (@Tqn37)	1,040 subscribers	Community content
<b>Habib Luthfi</b>	Website (habibluthfi.net)	Active	Profile, schedule, videos
<b>Pesantren Al-Bahjah</b>	Website (buyayahya.co.id)	Active	Educational resources
<b>Nur Al-Wala</b>	Website (nurulwala.co.id)	Active	Virtual pesantren tasawuf

WhatsApp groups turned out to be the most vital digital platform for managing tarekat associations. The 8 groups that were being monitored had around 2,400 members and were used for a variety of purposes such as receiving daily wurd reminders, sharing murshid teachings, planning real-world get-togethers, and offering one another support among the murid.

YouTube is a storehouse of spiritual content that transcends time and place. Recorded dhikr sessions enable murid in any place to engage in group practice, and lecture recordings amplify the reach of the murshid's teaching manifold.

#### 4.3. Translation Processes in Digital Mediation

The translation of traditional tarekat practices into digital format exposed intricate negotiations around meaning, authority and efficacy.

##### 4.3.1. *Problematization: Pandemic as Catalyst*

The COVID-19 pandemic was an important moment of problematization that made the tarekat leadership redefined spiritual connectivity as a problem in need of digital solutions. A murshid of TQN recounted:

When the authorities shut down the mosques, I said to my khalifah: we need to find ways how to connect and reach out our murid. Their spiritual needs do not go on lock down with the pandemic."

##### 4.3.2. *Interessement: Legitimizing Digital Platforms*

The maturing phase brought the identities of murid tak muda and khalifah into being accepters of digital mediums as spiritual legitimate media. This process encountered initial resistance:

"Some of our older brothers would not at first ACCEPT. They'd say, 'How can baraka flow from a machine? We just had to be able to show them gradually, let them see for themselves

that the connection is still there.” (Khalifah, TQN)

#### *4.3.3. Enrollment: Establishing Digital Protocols*

Children were enrolled and named roles in digital engagements were set up. The Mahabbah platform is, by any measure, a big load. A wide on-ramp that conflicts head-on with the avalanche of competing content and union breaking individualism inherent in the medium. The launch has seen JATMAN essentially create its own social media forum—JATMAN Town—but also grant users access to a form of spiritual Tinder: weRooms.org: where people connect for zikir (traditional tarekat chanting services).

#### *4.3.4. Mobilization: Representing the Network*

And it's about mobilizing to make sure the digital spokespeople actually reflect what everyone is feeling. Khalifah shared the digital engagement scorecard with murshid so that leadership could see how healthy the network was and where to tweak strategies.

### *4.4. Authority Reconfiguration*

Instead, digital mediation has reconstituted rather than eradicated measurers of traditional forms of religious authority. The murshid remains the ultimate source of spiritual branding, but in the digital age, a new hierarchy is born and a new authentication mechanism.

#### *4.4.1. The Bay'ah Question*

The most controversial aspect of digital translation is related to Ibn al-'Arabi's concept of bay'ah, the initiation oath that has traditionally required physical presence, hand-holding, and direct transmission. The traditionalist view as expressed by a murshid of Tijaniyah is:

“We ended up doing it in the pandemic out of a need of necessity. But bay'ah needs a person's presence – the hand, the breath, the eye contact. You can't transmit on a screen what needs be transmitted.”

However, some orders have adapted to a combination of initial online and later physical bay'ah after meeting the al-jilwj.

#### *4.4.2. Baraka and Digital Transmission*

The issue of whether baraka (spiritual blessings) can be transmitted over digital media prompted much debate. An exception to this theological lid was made by a khalifah from Syattariyah who proposed an innovative explanation:

“When some of our followers are unable to come and see us we have sent them a picture of the murshidic line so that they can place it before themselves when taking dhikr. The baraka runs through the picture.”

This practice carries on the use of photographs and writings as media for spiritual

connection into digital realms from historically mediated traditions.

#### 4.5. Hybrid Assemblages

The most important discovery regards the appearance of hybrid assemblages made up equally of human agents and digital platforms and traditional spiritual technologies.

Table 5: Hybrid Assemblages in Digital Tarekat

Assemblage	Human Components	Non-Human Components	Function
<b>Livestreamed Dhikr</b>	Murshid, murid (physical and virtual)	Camera, streaming platform, prayer beads	Collective spiritual practice across distance
<b>Digital Ijazah</b>	Murshid, recipient murid	PDF document, digital signature, email	Authorization and certification
<b>WhatsApp Wird Group</b>	Group administrator, participating murid	WhatsApp platform, wird text, notification system	Daily spiritual discipline maintenance
<b>Virtual Ziarah</b>	Pilgrims, local guide	Video call platform, shrine	Mediated visitation to sacred sites

### 5. The Role Of Recitation And Contemplation Of The Qur'an Across Different Student Levels

#### 5.1. Theoretical Implications

This analysis showcases the utility of ANT as an analytic tool for understanding religious change and practice in digital environments. By framing digital platforms as an actant exercising agency in network formation, rather than tools used by human actors, the study illustrates technology not only as passively transmitting spiritual practice but also actively shaping it.

These results are congruent with Latour's (2005) argument that social action arises through heterogeneous assemblages rather than pre-existent structures. Tarekat networks in the digital age are not only new structures piled onto older ones; rather they are new assemblages in which coming into relation with any number of traditional authority figures and technologies is reconfigured—and one we arguably has established an obligatory point of passage between—mutually constitutive.

#### 5.2. Digital Platforms as Obligatory Passage Points

The digitised platformisation of OPPs is a powerful reconfiguration of tarekat authority structures. The murshid was historically the sole OPP through whom had passed the chain of spirit transmission. These digital platforms open up parallel OPPs that can both support and question murshid authority.

WhatsApp groups, for example, serve as OPPs for aligning regular spiritual disciplines. Murid have

to go through these platforms in order to receive wurd reminders, be able to learn and also participate in community discussions. The gatekeeper nature of the digital administrator managing group membership and content regulation means that they become a type of authority never before seen in traditional tarekat hierarchical formation.

### 5.3. Translation and Authenticity

Converting traditional practices to digital forms brings up foundational issues of authenticity and effectiveness. The evidence uncovers the way tarekat communities discuss these issues not in terms of full endorsement or resistance to digital mediation but through theological interpretation.

The transference of Baraka through photographs and digital images is creative theological work, which accord with realism, and cultural introduction on new traditions in light of their tradition. This is exactly what Latour calls “translation”—the conversion of sense and actions as they travel through networks.

### 5.4. Practical Implications

For tarekat leadership, these findings provide a picture about how to effectively engage in the digital world. The popularity of hybrid models — blending digital outreach with a continued focus on physical presence for key rituals — indicate a way forward that neither jettisons tradition outright nor fends off technological progress.

The rise of digital administrators as network actors of consequence signals the call for tarekat to intentionally develop this role, so that technical competence is harnessed alongside spiritual formation within clear linkages and accountabilities to traditional authority structures.

## 6. Conclusion

This research has examined Indonesian tarekat as social networks using Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory ala the actor-network theory, in order to demonstrate human and non-human actors involved in the construction of contemporary Sufi practices on digital. What the findings show is that tarekat networks – and their spiritual activities, communities, relations of authority – work through assemblages that are more complex: digital platforms are not only instruments but also actants in shaping spirituality. The translation of old practices to digital technologies entails constant renegotiation of meaning, authenticity and effectiveness. Instead of eroding traditional authority, digital mediation reconfigures it—producing new intermediaries layers and forms of authentication, extends the reach summoned up by the network while retaining enduring commitments to silsilah-based spiritual transmission. Digital mediums were shown to serve as necessary passage points which supplement, rather than replace the central role of the murshid. The hybrid formations studied here—livestreamed dhikr, digital ijazah lineages, WhatsApp wurd groups, virtual ziarah—are imaginative measures of retaining spiritual connection across the Indonesian archipelago into territories beyond. This study adds to the theoretical “AMT” literature by showing its analytical potential for examining religion-technology nexus by various communities of faith. Further research could expand on digital tarekat practices outside Indonesia and different organizations, long-term effects of digital mediation on spiritual formation, as well as comparative dimensions with Sufi orders in other Muslim-majority countries.

Transformations which had long been in process were hastened by the COVID-19 pandemic, forced

tarekat communities to “go digital” at an intensity never experienced before. Given Indonesia’s rapidly developing digital infrastructures (and near 75% internet penetration and deep-seated social media use), the hybrid assemblages identified in this study are likely to become ever more normative. Such transformations are of interest to scholars of religion, technology, and Indonesian society, as well as to tarekat communities themselves grappling with the opportunities and challenges presented by the digital age.

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