SUFISM AS THE SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION OF ANTI-FEUDALIST DA'WAH: A CRITIQUE OF HIERARCHICAL SOCIAL STRUCTURES

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ABSTRACT :

This study critically examines the potential of Sufism as a spiritual and ethical foundation for anti-feudalist da'wah in Islamic social thought. Feudalism, understood not merely as a historical socio-economic system but as a persistent hierarchical mentality, continues to legitimize social inequality, patronage, and the glorification of worldly status in modern societies. In response, this article posits that Sufism—with its core principles of tawadhu' (humility), zuhud (detachment from worldly obsession), ikhlas (sincerity), and ukhuwwah (spiritual brotherhood)—offers a profound spiritual critique of such hierarchical structures. Through a qualitative literature review of classical Sufi works by Al-Ghazali, Ibn 'Arabi, and Rumi, as well as contemporary analyses, this research demonstrates how Sufi ontology and ethics deconstruct feudal logic by affirming the ontological equality of all human beings before God. The concept of tawhid (divine oneness) is reinterpreted not only as a theological axiom but as a social principle that negates any form of human domination. Furthermore, the article highlights how Sufi teachings foster a form of da'wah that is inherently emancipatory, promoting social justice, moral accountability, and egalitarian consciousness. By purifying the self from spiritual diseases such as kibr (arrogance) and hubb al-jah (love of status), Sufism cultivates a socio-spiritual awareness that challenges both feudal legacies and their modern manifestations. Thus, this paper concludes that Sufism provides a transformative framework for da'wah that seeks not only personal piety but also the establishment of a just and non-hierarchical social order rooted in divine love and moral integrity.

Keywords : feudalism, Sufism, equality, spiritual ethics, social order

Introduction

Feudalism, at its core, represents a social system in which power, hierarchy, and inherited status constitute the primary determinants of social position. Within such a system, an individual's standing is not evaluated on the basis of merit, ethical integrity, or social contribution, but rather on lineage and proximity to centers of authority. Power becomes naturalized, hierarchy is normalized, and inequality is socially legitimized through cultural and symbolic means rather than moral justification.[1]

Historically, feudalism emerged from agrarian societies in the medieval period, where land ownership was concentrated in the hands of a noble elite, while the majority of the population depended upon them for survival. Social relations were structured through patron–client arrangements characterized by asymmetrical dependence: rulers provided protection and access to resources, while subjects offered loyalty, labor, and obedience with minimal social or political rights. Such relationships entrenched subordination as a social norm and institutionalized inequality as an accepted order.[2]^2

In modern societies, however, feudalism no longer operates primarily through land ownership or monarchic rule. Instead, it has transformed into what may be termed *social and cultural feudalism*. This contemporary manifestation appears in practices such as political patronage, where positions and decisions are determined by personal loyalty rather than competence; excessive reverence toward status and authority, whereby high-ranking individuals are automatically considered more honorable regardless of moral conduct; and the tendency to measure dignity through worldly positions rather than meaningful contributions to public welfare.[3] In this sense, feudalism has evolved from a structural system into a pervasive social mentality.

Modern feudalism thus functions less as an explicit political–economic structure and more as a mode of thinking embedded within social behavior, institutional culture, and collective values. It legitimizes inequality not merely through law or coercion, but through cultural consent. Rahman refers to this phenomenon as a "feudal mode of thinking," a mindset that normalizes submission to authority and resists the principle of human equality.[4] Such a mentality undermines fundamental human values by placing certain individuals above others based on power and status rather than moral excellence or ethical responsibility. It cultivates a collective ego that associates honor with position rather than service, authority rather than virtue. From an Islamic perspective, this worldview directly contradicts the Qur'anic principle *inna akramakum 'inda Allāhi atqākum*—that true nobility before God is determined by piety, not social rank.

Within this context, Sufism (taṣawwuf) emerges as the inner and ethical dimension of Islamic teachings that emphasizes spiritual purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and the cleansing of the heart (*taṭhīr al-qalb*) from moral and spiritual diseases that distort human relations with God and fellow beings. Sufism offers a profound moral and spiritual correction to the roots of feudalism, for feudal behavior ultimately originates from diseases of the heart: arrogance

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[1] Hidayat, R. (2018). *Sistem Feodal dan Struktur Sosial di Indonesia*. Bandung: Alfabeta.
[2] See classical discussions on medieval agrarian societies and patron–client relations.
[3] Nata, A. (2020). *Akhlak Tasawuf*. Jakarta: RajaGrafindo Persada.
[4] Rahman, F. (2019). *Pemikiran Sosial Islam dan Modernitas*. Bandung: Mizan.

(*kibr*), which elevates the self above others through status or power; excessive attachment to worldly life (*ḥubb al-dunyā*), which transforms wealth and authority into ultimate goals; and love of status (*ḥubb al-jāh*), the desire to be glorified, revered, and admired by others.[5]

From a Sufi perspective, these traits constitute alternative forms of servitude—forms of worship directed not to God but to the ego, power, and worldly recognition. A person bound by status and honor is not spiritually free, for they remain enslaved to social perception and hierarchical validation. Sufism, by contrast, seeks to liberate human beings from such false hierarchies. It asserts that true dignity lies in sincerity, humility, and consciousness of God rather than in rank or lineage.[6] A genuine Sufi does not evaluate human worth through social position, but through inner purification and ethical conduct. In this sense, Sufism stands as a spiritual antithesis to feudalism.

Substantively, the core values of Sufism directly oppose feudal logic. Among these values is *tawāḍuʿ* (humility), which affirms the fundamental equality of all human beings before God and dismantles the social arrogance that sustains hierarchical domination. A Sufi does not perceive oneself as superior or inferior to others, but as equally a servant of God, thereby undermining the social pride that fuels feudal culture. Another key value is *zuhd* (detachment), understood not as rejection of the world, but as freedom from dependence on worldly status, wealth, or recognition. This value challenges the feudal principle that glorifies power and rank as measures of human worth. Furthermore, *ukhuwwah* (spiritual brotherhood) transcends social, ethnic, and hierarchical boundaries, recognizing all human beings as fellow travelers toward God. Such spiritual solidarity dissolves the rigid divisions between "superiors" and "subordinates" that feudal systems seek to preserve.[7]

If feudalism constructs a social order marked by domination and hierarchy, Sufism proposes a spiritual order grounded in equality and liberation. Within the Sufi worldview, worldly authority holds no absolute value, for all true sovereignty belongs solely to God. Consequently, Sufism functions as a moral and spiritual critique of feudal culture in politics, bureaucracy, and everyday social life. By purifying the heart from attachment to power and status, Sufism nurtures the awareness that no human being stands above another except through piety and ethical responsibility. This perspective aligns closely with the Islamic vision of social justice, which rejects domination, oppression, and dehumanization. Therefore, in the context of this study, Sufism is not merely a spiritual discipline, but an ethical ideology that challenges feudal structures and affirms the principle of human equality before God.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative descriptive–analytical approach using library research as its primary method. The data are derived from primary Sufi sources—particularly classical texts of Islamic mysticism—and secondary literature addressing feudalism and its manifestations within modern social contexts. These sources provide both the normative-spiritual foundations and the socio-theoretical perspectives necessary for critical analysis.

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[5] Nata, A. (2020). *Akhlak Tasawuf*. Jakarta: RajaGrafindo Persada.
[6] Nasution, H. (2008). *Falsafat dan Mistisisme dalam Islam*. Jakarta: Bulan Bintang.
[7] Al-Ghazali. (2017). *Ihya' Ulumuddin*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah.

Data analysis is conducted through qualitative content analysis and conceptual analysis. The analytical process follows several systematic stages: data reduction to identify relevant concepts and arguments; thematic categorization to map key Sufi values and feudal mentalities; interpretative analysis to examine their underlying meanings and relational dynamics; and theoretical triangulation to enhance analytical validity by engaging multiple scholarly perspectives. This methodological framework enables a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how feudal mentalities are constructed, legitimized, and potentially deconstructed through Sufi ethical and spiritual principles.

Results and Discussion

Feudalism constitutes a social system that not only structures society through hierarchical arrangements but also instills a mentality of submission to particular forms of authority. Although it is commonly associated with medieval European history, its underlying values remain evident in modern societies through practices such as patronage culture, excessive reverence for social status, and the evaluation of honor based on worldly position rather than ethical merit.[8] This feudal mentality emphasizes that an individual's dignity and influence are determined by status or proximity to power, rather than by competence, moral integrity, or meaningful social contribution.[9]

The following discussion provides a conceptual framework for understanding this phenomenon in a comprehensive manner, which serves as an essential foundation for analyzing Sufi values as an antithesis to feudalism. Through this framework, the study highlights not only the structural dimensions of feudalism but also the internalized mentalities that sustain social inequality, as well as the ways in which Sufi spiritual values may offer an ethical and transformative response to such conditions.[10]

1. Description of Feudalism in a Social Context

The term **"feudalism"** comes from the Latin word *feudum* or *feudum*, which literally means "land of grants." This meaning refers to a land ownership system in which a ruler (king or high nobility) gives a piece of land (*fief*) to his subordinates in exchange for loyalty and services, usually in the form of military or political support.[11] In its original sense, land was a symbol of power and a political tool. By controlling the land, one controls the economic resources, labor and even the social life of the people who live on it. Therefore, *the feudal system* is not just a land system, but also a social and political control mechanism. Marc Bloch (1961) in his classic work *Feudal Society* explains that feudalism is "a network of intertwined personal obligations between rulers and vassals, bound by land as a symbol of power and loyalty." In other words, land functions as a tool to maintain power through loyalty, not as a mere individual property.

Feudalism is not just an economic system, but also a hierarchical social and cultural structure. In this system, society was divided into strict layers: kings and nobles at the top,

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[8] Iswanto, H. (2007). *The Application of Al-Ghazâli's Tasawûf Ethic to Actualize Good Governance in Indonesia*. *Millah: Jurnal Studi Agama*, 7(1)

[9] Rahman, F. (2019). *Pemikiran Sosial Islam dan Modernitas*. Bandung: Mizan.

[10] Nasution, H. (2008). *Falsafat dan Mistisisme dalam Islam*. Jakarta: Bulan Bintang.

[11] Bloch, M. (1961). *Feudal Society*. University of Chicago Press.

officials and soldiers in the middle and commoners at the bottom.[12] The people serve with energy and produce, while the ruler provides protection. This relationship fosters a dependency called *the patron-client relationship*, where the weak side is always subservient to the strong side.[13] Feudalism also shaped social consciousness: outward status, lineage and proximity to rulers became a measure of honor. Human values and morals are no longer the basis of social reward, so that a submissive society is formed not because of justice, but because of tradition and fear.[14]

Sufis, through their spiritual teachings, often criticize subtly oppressive social systems. They reject a worldview that judges people based on social status. In Sufism, all human beings are equal creatures of Allah before Him; The difference lies only in piety.[15] This view fostered a spirit of moral resistance to the oppressive feudal order.

Rumi writes in *Matsnawi Ma'nawi*: "Do not look at one's rank or clothing, for the holy spirit does not wear the robe of a king or a servant.".[16] Rumi rejects the social hierarchy that separates humans based on outward status. He taught that divine love (*maḥabbah*) is the force that unites all human beings without limits of status or power.[17] In the social context, Rumi's teachings became a spiritual call to subvert feudal pride.

Ibn 'Arabi developed the concept *of Wahdat al-Wujūd* (unity of existence), that all beings are manifestations of one Divine Being.[18] Thus, there is no basis for humans to exalt themselves. This view became a metaphysical critique of feudalism that glorified the king and oppressed the people. For Ibn 'Arabi, all forms of social superiority were just worldly illusions.[19]

Al-Ghazali in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* emphasizes that power is not a privilege, but a trust that will be accounted for before Allah.[20] He warned: "The tyranny of a ruler is more dangerous than the foolishness of his people." Thus, feudalism, which places the king as a semi-divine figure, is contrary to the Islamic teachings of leadership as a moral and spiritual responsibility.[21]

The Qur'an rejects a social order that judges glory based on descent. In Surah Al-Hujurat verse 13, Allah says: ... Indeed, Allah is the Creator of all things.

"*Verily, the most noble among you in the sight of Allah is the most pious*."

This verse becomes the theological foundation that human excellence is not determined by social status, but by moral and spiritual qualities. Fakhruddin ar-Razi in Tafsir al-Kabir interprets this verse as "the cutting off of the roots of arrogance, nasab and power".[22] This interpretation clearly rejects the moral basis of feudalism that deifies the lineage. Thus, from the perspective of Islamic interpretation, the feudal system is not only socially unjust, but also

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[12] Scott, J. C. (1972). *Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia*. *American Political Science Review*, 66(1)

[13] Anderson, B. (1972). *The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture*. Cornell University Press.

[14] Nasr, S. H. (2015). *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition*. New York: HarperOne.

[15] Nasr, S. H. (1987). *Islamic Life and Thought*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

[16] Rumi, J. (2007). *The Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi* (R. A. Nicholson, Trans.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published ca. 1258)

[17] Schimmel, A. (1975). *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. University of North Carolina Press.

[18] Chittick, W. C. (1989). *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*. State University of New York Press.

[19] Corbin, H. (1969). *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*. Princeton University Press.

[20] Al-Ghazali. (2017). *Ihya' Ulumuddin*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah.

[21] Nasr, S. H. (1987). *Islamic Life and Thought*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

[22] Ar-Razi, F. (1999). *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb (Tafsir al-Kabir)*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr.

contrary to monotheism, because it places humans as if they have "sovereignty" outside of Allah.[23]

In the social order, the understanding of feudalism can be studied based on the opinions of experts, namely Karl Marx who assessed feudalism as the early stage in the history of class society. In this system, the means of production (land) are owned by the nobility, while the peasant is only a labor force without property rights. This relationship is exploitative because the people are forced to work to maintain minority power. Marx said that this system must be replaced by a new social order that gives economic rights to the working class.[24] Weber (1978) referred to feudalism as a traditional form *of authority*, in which power is legitimized by religious customs and beliefs. The king is considered to have a "divine right" to rule. Such authority is not based on legal rationality, but on hereditary beliefs. Weber asserts that social modernization demands the "rationalization of authority," replacing the legitimacy of descent with legal legitimacy.[25] Durkheim explained that feudal society was bound by *mechanical solidarity*, a social unity formed by the commonality of tradition and dependence.[26] However, this solidarity is rigid and suppresses individual freedom. Modern society, on the other hand, is built on *organic solidarity*, that is, equality born of a fair division of social roles.[27]

In the context of the archipelago, feudalism developed through the agrarian kingdom system, especially in Java. The king is considered to have *a divine revelation* (divine mandate) that makes his power sacred. The priyayi group emerged as a layer of bureaucratic elite who mediated between the king and the people.[28] This structure created a sharp social inequality: the priyayi had the privileges of land and labor, while the commoners became *kawula*, i.e. devoted to their masters. Clifford Geertz (1960) called this relationship a "paternalistic structure" that made the people morally and economically dependent.

During the colonial period, the Dutch took advantage of local feudal structures to control society. Through *the cultuurstelsel* (forced planting) system, the regents and local nobles were used as a tool of colonial power to mobilize the people's labor.[29] In other words, colonialism extended feudalism with a new face, not only a king who ruled over the people, but also a foreign power that took advantage of the local elite.[30] This social system gave rise to acute economic inequality and instilled a feudal mentality that is still felt today: excessive respect for status, proximity to power and low participation of the people in decision-making.[31]

Based on the above explanation, it can be understood that feudalism is both from a spiritual, theological and sociological perspective, all schools of thought agree that feudalism is a system that violates the essence of humanity. The Sufis rejected feudalism because it denied spiritual equality; The mufassirs rejected it because it was contrary to monotheism and the social scientists rejected it because it perpetuated class exploitation. Feudalism teaches submission to other human beings, while Islam teaches submission only to Allah. Therefore, the resistance to feudalism is not only a political struggle, but also a moral and spiritual jihad to uphold human dignity.

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[23] Qutb, S. (2003). *Fi Zhilal al-Qur'an*. Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq.

[24] Marx, K. (1976). *Capital: Volume I* (B. Fowkes, Trans.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1867)

[25] Weber, M. (1958). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Charles Scribner's Sons.

[26] Durkheim, E. (1984). *The Division of Labor in Society* (W. D. Halls, Trans.). Free Press.

[27] Lukes, S. (1973). *Émile Durkheim: His Life and Work*. Penguin Books.

[28] Anderson, B. (1972). *The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture*. Cornell University Press.

[29] Ricklefs, M. C. (2001). *A History of Modern Indonesia since c.1200*. Stanford University Press.

[30] Kartodirdjo, S. (1984). *Banten Peasant Rebellion of 1888*. Pustaka Jaya.

[31] ibid

2. The Values of Sufism as the Antithesis of Feudalism

Sufism is an inner and spiritual dimension in Islam that focuses on the process of purification of the heart (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), the cultivation of noble morals (*akhlaq al-karimah*) and the achievement of awareness of God's presence (*ma'rifatullah*). It emerged as a response to formalistic and materialistic tendencies in religious and social life, with the aim of returning man to true spiritual and human balance. Meanwhile, feudalism is a socio-political system that places power, honor and privilege on a handful of elites, whether based on descent, wealth or religious authority. This system creates a rigid social hierarchy and fosters the people's dependence on the upper class.[32] In historical and philosophical contexts, Sufism exists as an antithesis to feudalism. Through its teachings on spiritual equality, the rejection of worldly pride and the affirmation of pure monotheism, Sufism abolishes man-made hierarchies and affirms universal glory based on piety, not social status.

Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111 AD) was one of the most influential figures in the history of Islamic thought. In his monumental work *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (The Awakening of Religious Sciences), he defined Sufism as the path to purification of the heart from despicable qualities and the filling of the soul with praiseworthy qualities, so that one can get closer to Allah SWT. According to al-Ghazali, human beings have two main dimensions: outward (body and deeds) and inner (soul and intention). If the inner dimension is soiled by pride, envy or worldly love, then all outward deeds become worthless. Therefore, Sufism is present as a process of spiritual cleansing (tazkiyah) that leads humans to purity of intention and sincerity.[33] He rejects the measure of glory that comes from position, wealth or descent, because they are mortal and worldly. For al-Ghazali, the true worth of a human being is not measured by social status, but by the purity of his heart. He emphasized that Allah does not look at the appearance and wealth of man, but his heart and deeds (referring to the hadith of the Prophet PBUH). Thus, al-Ghazali's teachings had great social implications: they removed feudal boundaries and social hierarchies by asserting that true glory was possessed only by the *pious* and *sincere*, not by those of worldly standing. In this context, Sufism is a tool of moral criticism of the splendor and hypocrisy of the elite class, both religious and political. "Whoever knows himself, he knows his Lord; and whoever knows his Lord, he will not be deceived by the world."[34]

Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi (1165–1240 AD), a great Sufi and philosopher from Andalusia, developed a metaphysical teaching known as Wahdat al-Wujud, i.e. *the Unity of Being*. In this view, only Allah has a true form (*al-Wujud al-Haqiqi*), while all creation is merely a manifestation of God's existence in various forms. Ibn 'Arabi explained that the universe is a "mirror" in which God reflects His attributes. Therefore, all beings, whether humans, animals or nature, have a divine dimension within them. Each entity is a sign (verse) that indicates the presence of God.[35] From this view, there are very important theological and social consequences: no creature is truly separate from God and therefore no human being is essentially superior to another. The difference between humans is only in the level of consciousness of God. Thus, *Wahdat al-Wujud* became the basis of spiritual egalitarianism in Islam. All human beings have the same divine essence, so feudalism or an oppressive social system becomes contrary to the principle of monotheism. In the teachings of Ibn 'Arabi, human perfection (*al-insan al-kamil*) is achieved when one realizes oneness with God, not in the sense of being physically united, but in the inner awareness that there is nothing but Allah. "I look upon all creation as one body; his spirit is God and his limbs are creatures." (Ibn 'Arabi, *Futuhat*

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[32] Giddens, A. (2013). *Sociology* (7th ed.). Cambridge: Polity Press.
[33] Al-Ghazali. (2017). *Ihya' Ulumuddin*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah.
[34] Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Jilid II
[35] Giddens, A. (2013). *Sociology* (7th ed.). Cambridge: Polity Press.

al-Makkiyyah). This thought instills a universal spiritual consciousness, that respect for fellow human beings is a form of respect for God. This view gives birth to tolerance, inclusivity and humanism in the teachings of Sufism.

Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273 AD), the great Persian poet and Sufi, deepened the teachings of Sufism by placing love (mahabbah) as the core of man's relationship with God and others. For Rumi, the whole life is a journey of love from God, by God and towards God. In his main work *Matsnawi-i Ma'nawi*, Rumi explains that love for God cannot be separated from love for His creatures. Since every creature is a manifestation of God, loving man, nature and all creation is the highest form of worship. He wrote with full spirituality: "I see only one face in each face; I love all, because everything is Him." (Rumi, 2004). Rumi's view strengthens Ibn 'Ahari's thinking about the unity of existence. The difference is, if Ibn 'Arabi emphasizes the ontological (philosophical) dimension of unity, then Rumi emphasizes the emotional and ethical dimension, that love is a bridge between God and man. For Rumi, love is a force that destroys the ego (*nafs*), cultivates humility and opens the door to universal brotherhood. When love becomes the basis of social interaction, then discrimination and social hierarchy disappear, because everything is seen as part of God's love. Thus, Rumi's teachings gave birth to humanistic and cosmopolitan Sufism which is an inclusive spirituality that transcends the boundaries of race, nation, and even religion. In the social context, Rumi's love teachings are a form of antithesis to feudalism that relies on power and social status to determine human values.

In the study of Sufism, the thoughts of these three great figures, namely **Imam al-Ghazali, Ibn 'Arabi and Jalaluddin Rumi**, show the same unity of spiritual goals, although they use different methods to achieve them. All three emphasize that the center of human value lies in their heart and closeness to God, not in social status, position or wealth. Al-Ghazali emphasized purification of the heart and moral formation (*tazkiyah al-nafs*) as the foundation of human glory, rejecting worldly measures as a benchmark of value. Ibn 'Arabi, through the concept *of Wahdat al-Wujud*, affirms that all beings are manifestations of God, so that all human beings have an equal divine essence. Rumi emphasizes universal love (*mahabbah*) as a way to realize the oneness of God in every creation, fostering empathy and compassion that unites humans regardless of social differences.

From a social perspective, these three approaches indirectly oppose feudalism. Al-Ghazali rejected glory measured by social status, position or descent, thus erasing the legitimacy of social hierarchies based on worldly power. Ibn 'Arabi removed the philosophical basis of social discrimination by emphasizing the equality of human nature. Rumi promotes brotherhood and solidarity through universal love, which negates social or emotional restrictions between human beings. These three perspectives complementarily form the framework of Sufism that not only leads individuals to purity and closeness to God, but also develops an egalitarian and humanistic social consciousness. Thus, Sufism according to al-Ghazali, Ibn 'Arabi and Rumi is not only a personal spiritual path, but also a tool of moral and social criticism of oppressive feudal structures. Al-Ghazali guides humans to uphold moral and spiritual integrity, Ibn 'Arabi cultivates an awareness of the divine essence that is equal to all humans and Rumi teaches a love that unites humans regardless of status or background. The combination of these three approaches resulted in a **comprehensive, egalitarian and humanistic** view of Sufism, making it a philosophical and moral antithesis to feudalism.

In the context of the archipelago, Benedict Anderson (1972) referred to the feudal system as a "culture of power" in which the ruler was considered to have a mystical charisma that demanded absolute obedience. In such a system, the servitude of man to man becomes commonplace, something that is theologically contrary to the teachings of Islamic monotheism.

The essence of Sufism is monotheism, which is the realization that only Allah SWT has absolute power over the entire universe. Tawheed in Sufism is not only interpreted as a

theological statement about the oneness of God, but also as a social and moral principle that shapes the relationship between humans and others. According to Fazlur Rahman (1982), monotheism is not only a theological declaration, but also has profound socio-political implications. Realizing that only God is sovereign, man should not place any ruler or individual as an object of servitude or worship, as this is contrary to the principle of God's oneness.

In the context of feudal structures, rulers are often positioned as if they possess "semi-divine" power, in which kings, nobles or high officials are seen as intrinsically more noble than ordinary people. The Buddhist tradition rejects this kind of hierarchical logic. The Sufis affirm that every human being is an equal servant of Allah and that one's glory is not determined by position, wealth or descent, but by spiritual closeness to God and piety.

Harun Nasution (2008) emphasized that true Sufism awareness gives birth to an egalitarian attitude, because it judges human beings based on mental qualities, not lineage. From the perspective of Sufism, human devotion should only be directed to Allah, so the practice of feudalism that places rulers above the people becomes morally and spiritually invalid. This egalitarian value makes Sufism a tool of criticism of social inequality and hierarchical domination, while offering a vision of a just and equal society, where every individual has equal dignity before God. Thus, monotheism in Sufism not only directs individuals to spiritual consciousness, but also forms a socio-political consciousness that rejects oppression and feudal hierarchies. This value affirms that every human being, from kings to commoners, has the same essence as a servant of God, and true glory is reflected in piety and obedience to divine principles, not in social status or worldly power.

Shaykh Abdul Qadir al-Jailani (d. 1166) in his teachings on takhalli, tahalli and tajalli emphasized that humans must free themselves from the love of the world in order to become a just and moral servant (Al-Jailani, 2020). The concepts *of takhalli* (cleansing oneself from the reprehensible nature and attachments of the world), *tahalli* (filling the heart with noble morals), and *tajalli* (witnessing the manifestation of God in creation) guide humans to achieve spiritual and moral balance. Thus, al-Jailani's teachings not only emphasized the sanctity of the individual, but also dismantled feudal morality that judged glory based on wealth and power. Through these teachings, Sufism frees humans from the two main pillars of feudalism: the domination of property and the dominance of social status. By emphasizing zuhud, Sufism encourages egalitarian awareness and social justice. Individuals no longer measure themselves or others by material or position, but by mental qualities and piety. This shows that Sufism is not just a personal spiritual practice, but also a tool of moral criticism of social inequality, making it an antithesis to oppressive feudal structures.

In the history of Islam in the archipelago, Sheikh Siti Jenar is one of the most controversial and influential Sufi figures in shaping the spiritual and social consciousness of the Javanese people in the 15th century. He was known not only as a mystic, but also as a symbol of spiritual resistance to religious and political feudalism during the Demak Sultanate. Through her famous teaching, namely "Manunggaling Kawula-Gusti", Sheikh Siti Jenar affirms the existence of a unity of existence between servant (kawula) and God (Gusti), which is a view that is in line with the concept of *Wahdat al-Wujud* Ibn 'Arabi, but firmly rooted in the cultural and social context of Javanese society (Rahmawati, 2019). The teachings of "Manunggaling Kawula-Gusti" are not only metaphysical in meaning, but also have radical social and political implications. By emphasizing the unity between man and God, Sheikh Siti Jenar rejected the existence of a monopoly of truth by the religious authority of the palace. At that time, clerics affiliated with the royal power often acted as guardians of the political legitimacy of the king and the feudal system. Siti Jenar views this practice as a form of spiritual deviation, because it ignores the essence of human equality before God. For Siti Jenar, human relationships with God are direct and do not require hierarchical intermediaries such as scholars or rulers, so that each individual has the same spiritual potential to achieve closeness to Allah.

According to Azyumardi Azra (2013), Sheikh Siti Jenar's thoughts can be interpreted as a form of spiritual emancipation of the small people, namely an effort to liberate the community from the dominance of oppressive political power and religious authority. Siti Jenar's teachings provide space for freedom of thought, existential equality and spiritual autonomy. In this context, Sufism in the archipelago not only functions as an individualistic mystical teaching, but also as a liberating social movement. Through a spiritual approach, Siti Jenar fosters awareness that human dignity is not determined by social status, but by her awareness of God's presence in her. Siti Jenar's teachings are thus a transformative form of Sufism, that is, Sufism that not only leads people to spiritual union with God, but also dismantles oppressive and hierarchical social structures. His rejection of feudal authority suggests that sufistic values in the archipelago have played a role as a liberating social force, which affirms that all human beings have the same divine dignity and potential. Through teachings like these, Sufism became the ethical and spiritual basis for the formation of an egalitarian and just society in the midst of a rigid feudal system.

According to al-Banjari, the essence of true Sufism is faith, Islam and ihsan which are manifested in real actions. Faith is the basis of belief, Islam is the framework of charity and ihsan is the dimension of moral beauty that animates all human behavior. Therefore, Sufism is not enough to be understood as a path of self-purification, but also as a means of building social justice and morality in society. True individual piety, in al-Banjari's view, must give birth to social piety, namely responsibility for welfare, justice and mutual benefit. This thinking shows that al-Banjari developed an ethical and social form of Sufism, not an escapist Sufism that moved away from the reality of society. He rejected the view that spiritual purity could be achieved by neglecting social responsibility. Within this framework, social justice and morality are seen as concrete manifestations of faith and ihsan. This means that a person is not considered truly faithful and moral if he is still tyrannical, discriminatory or supports an oppressive social system. The teachings of al-Banjari were firmly antithetical to the feudal system that developed in parts of the archipelago at that time. Feudalism, which placed the king and nobility as centers of power and a source of social legitimacy, often created inequality between the elite and the people. Sufism in the view of al-Banjari actually dismantles the structure of inequality by affirming the value of human equality before Allah SWT. Every individual has an equal moral responsibility to uphold justice and stay away from oppression, regardless of social status.

Thus, the teachings of Shaykh Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjari show that Sufism combined with fiqh not only functions for self-purification, but also to build a just and civilized social order. In a socio-political context, this idea shows how Islamic spirituality can be a moral force to fight structural injustice and feudalism. The al-Banjari version of Sufism is a Sufism that lives deeply rooted in society, upholds human values and makes faith the basis for positive social change.

3.   Analysis of the Relationship between Feudalism and Sufism

Feudalism and Sufism, although they come from different realms, one socio-political and the other spiritual, have similarities in the outward form of their hierarchical structures. Both of them put some people in a higher position and some in a lower position. However, these similarities are only visible on the surface. When delved deeper, the difference in purpose, meaning and value behind the hierarchical structure is actually very contrasting.

In the feudal system, the social structure was strictly regulated. At the top of the hierarchy stood a king or nobleman, who had power over the land and the lives of his people. The layer below it consisted of petty nobles, officials and ordinary citizens who had to submit to the orders of the ruler. According to Max Weber (1958), feudal society considered this kind of order as something natural, even sacred, because it was considered part of God's will to

maintain the balance of the world. The king is seen not only as a political leader, but also as a symbol of the order of the cosmos, the representative of God who maintains harmony on earth.

Therefore, in feudal society, the people's obedience to the king was not only political, but also religious and moral. Submission to authority is considered part of obedience to God. To oppose the king is to oppose the divine order. Therefore, the relationship between the ruler and the people is vertical, tiered and absolute. Everyone knows their place and the violation of hierarchy is considered to upset the balance of the world.

Similar structures can also be found in Sufism, especially in the system of tariqat. In the Sufi world, the spiritual hierarchy consists of the relationship between mursyid (spiritual teacher) and disciple (salik). Mursyid plays the role of a spiritual guide who shows the way to God, while the disciple must be submissive, obedient and respectful to the murshid. Annemarie Schimmel (1975) explained that for a Sufi, the teacher is not only a teacher, but an opener of the inner path; Without the teacher's guidance, a disciple will get lost in the maze of his own ego. In this guidance process, the disciples' obedience to the mursyid is a must. Al-Ghazali (2004) in *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* emphasizes that a disciple will not achieve *ma'rifatullah*, i.e. true knowledge of God without strict guidance and discipline under a spiritual teacher. He even analogizes the mursyid as a physician (psychiatrist) who understands the mental illness of his student, while the student must fully trust his instructions to be cured.

This relationship is at first glance similar to the loyalty of the people to the king in feudalism. In feudal society, the people were subject to the king because he was the source of protection, justice and safety. In Sufism, the disciple submits to the mursyid because he is believed to be a source of spiritual guidance that can lead to spiritual salvation. Both of these relationships emphasize obedience and respect for authority, but their context and meaning are very different.

According to Nurcholish Madjid (1992), the similarity of these forms indicates the existence of a "transposition of feudal values" into the spiritual world. That is, the values of respect, obedience and hierarchy previously found in the feudal social system, were transferred into the spiritual context of Sufism. However, in Sufism, these values are given a new meaning. If in feudalism obedience means submission to worldly power, then in Sufism obedience means subduing the ego (nafs) before spiritual wisdom. In other words, obedience in the Sufi world is not obedience to man as ruler, but to man as a mirror of Divine truth.

Although the hierarchical structure in Sufism appears similar to that of feudal structures, the substance is very different. In feudalism, hierarchy is material and political, based on lineage, wealth or power. The goal is to maintain social order and perpetuate the dominance of certain groups. People's obedience is outward, often based on fear or social obligation. In contrast, in Sufism, the hierarchy is spiritual and pedagogical. The position of the murshid is not determined by descent, but by the level of his mental purity and spiritual experience. The purpose of this hierarchy is not to perpetuate power, but to guide man through the spiritual level (*maqamat*) to achieve union with the Divine will. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1987) calls this structure a *"hierarchy of spiritual consciousness"*, where each level describes the degree of closeness of a person to God. Therefore, obedience in Sufism is fundamentally different from loyalty in feudalism. Feudal obedience is outward and political, while Sufi obedience is inner and spiritual. In feudalism, a person submits for fear of losing protection or social status. In Sufism, a disciple submits out of love, humility and the desire to know God. If feudalism gives birth to "obedience because of coercion", then Sufism gives birth to "obedience because of love".

However, due to their similarities, the teachings of Sufism are often easily accepted by societies rooted in feudal culture. In many Islamic regions, including the archipelago, people have become accustomed to living in a hierarchical system and placing leaders in the highest positions. The pattern of respect for mursyid or wali in the Sufi order is in line with the culture

of respecting kings or nobles. Therefore, as noted by Azyumardi Azra (1994), the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia was greatly influenced by Sufism, because the Sufis were able to adapt their teachings to the existing social structure. However, the similarities of these structures also have potential dangers. If obedience to the murshid turns into cult, then Sufism can slip into a new form of spiritual feudalism. In this condition, the relationship between the mursyid and the disciple is no longer educational and liberating, but restrained. Disciples no longer see the mursyid as a guide to God, but as a holy figure who should not be criticized. This kind of phenomenon, according to many scholars, is contrary to the spirit of true Sufism. The great Sufis have always insisted that the murshid is only an intermediary; It is not the teacher, but God alone.

The similarity of form between feudalism and Sufism is only an outward symbol of a deeper structure: both reflect the human need for order and guidance. However, if feudalism regulates the body and society, Sufism regulates the heart and soul. Therefore, Sufism is not really an extension of feudalism, but a spiritual transformation of the human social structure that seeks a balance between authority and freedom, between obedience and love.

In the history of Islam, many known Sufi figures have abandoned palace life and rejected worldly positions. One famous example is Ibrahim bin Adham, a king from the Balkh region who left his throne in search of spiritual truth. His story became a symbol of liberation from the shackles of feudalism, because he realized that splendor and power were only a curtain that covered man's view of the essence of God. Annemarie Schimmel (1975) described Ibrahim bin Adham's decision as a form of "inner revolution" of resistance to the social structure that made man tied to the world, property and false honor.

According to Nurcholish Madjid (1992), the teachings of Sufism that emphasizes equality and sincerity actually contain democratic values in Islam. Sufism rejects the view that humans can control other humans absolutely. In the Sufi view, power belongs only to God, while man is only a servant who is given a temporary entrustment. Therefore, Sufism is not only a religious practice, but also an ethical movement that corrects the unequal social structure.

Many Sufis in Islamic history have emerged as moral voices in the midst of a society trapped in feudal luxury. They lived simply, teaching love and reminding rulers to be just. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1987) referred to the Sufis as "the spiritual balancer of power." In Nasr's view, while the social system emphasizes power and domination, Sufism presents an inner dimension that emphasizes compassion, self-control and moral justice.

In the Eastern Islamic world, many Sufi figures used their teachings to criticize court life. For example, Rabiah al-Adawiyah, a female Sufi from Basrah, rejected luxury and chose to live in simplicity. He is famous for the concept of "pure love for God" (mahabbah ilahiyyah), which rejects worship based on fear or worldly selfishness. This attitude, symbolically, rejects all feudal values rooted in hierarchy and dubious interestsa.

In the archipelago, Sufism values also played an important role in correcting local feudal culture. Figures such as Sheikh Siti Jenar in Java, Hamzah Fansuri in Aceh and Sheikh Yusuf al-Makassari in Sulawesi are known to carry the message of spiritual equality. Sheikh Siti Jenar, for example, rejects excessive glorification of religious elites and nobles. He taught that God is not only present in the palace or mosque, but also in every human being. His view that emphasizes the unity of existence (*wahdatul wujud*) is an affirmation that all human beings have the same dignity because they come from one divine source. Thus, Sufism functions as the antithesis of feudalism. If feudalism builds a wall separating the powerful and the dominated, then Sufism breaks down that wall by teaching inner equality. When feudalism binds man with external power, then Sufism liberates man with love for God. If feudalism fosters self-pride, then Sufism fosters humility.

However, the strength of Sufism's critique of feudalism did not always appear in the form of open social resistance. In many cases, Sufism criticizes subtly through changes in values and life orientations. Sufism does not attack the power structure directly, but rather changes the meaning of power itself. A king who understood Sufi teachings would view his power not as a privilege, but as a trust. In this sense, Sufism does not destroy feudalism, but purifies and humanizes it. Therefore, Sufism is not only a spiritual movement, but also a moral and social movement. He upheld the principle that power should not be used to oppress, wealth should not be a source of pride and social status should not separate man from his fellow man. In a world full of inequality, Sufism is present as a light that leads people to return to the values of simplicity, compassion and justice. In other words, if feudalism is centered on domination over humans, then Sufism is centered on domination over oneself. A true Sufi is a "king in himself" not because he has power over others, but because he is able to subdue his passions and egos. This is the highest form of power recognized in Sufism: inner power over oneself.

Conceptually, this relationship arises because spiritual authority is often interpreted as part of the legitimacy of worldly power. In a highly religious society, political rulers need moral support to maintain their positions. Sufis, being revered as sacred figures and spiritual guides, sometimes became a symbol of legitimacy for the power of kings or nobles. The presence of a murshid or guardian affiliated with the ruler can confirm the claim that the king's power comes from the divine will. For example, in Islamic history, the Ottoman Turkish sultans and rulers in the Malay Sultanates and Aceh often used Sufi figures to assert their positions. Rulers associated with prominent Sufis are seen as "blessed" leaders who are worthy of obedience. Azyumardi Azra (1994) notes that the role of Sufis in this context is not necessarily directly political, but their moral legitimacy is strong enough to foster the loyalty of the people. In this case, Sufism served as a pillar of feudal ideology, where the spiritual hierarchy was parallel to the social hierarchy. This mechanism of legitimacy works through symbolism and ritual. For example, a ruler who receives bai'at or spiritual endorsement from a murshid is considered to have a divine mandate to rule. Disciples or people who respect the mursyid at the same time respect the ruler, so that obedience to God and obedience to the king become as if they are integrated. In this way, Sufism, which actually emphasizes spiritual equality, actually helps maintain a hierarchical social order. It should be noted that this legitimacy is often indirect and not always intentional. Many Sufis actively resist political interference. However, their presence in a hierarchical ruling environment still creates a correlation between spiritual authority and political authority. In this context, Sufism is not only a criticism of feudalism, but also a tool of social stabilization.

The long encounter between feudalism and Sufism left a deep imprint on Islamic culture, especially in the archipelago. Sufistic values such as patience, obedience and humility permeate the social ethics of society, shaping daily behavior and interaction. For example, the culture of respect for teachers, parents, and political leaders is not only based on social norms, but also reflects a combination of Sufi ethics and feudal norms, where obedience and respect are forms of self-purification as well as social order.

In the field of art and literature, the influence of this meeting is evident. Works such as Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin ar-Raniri combine the feel of the palace with a deep spiritual meaning. For example, the work *Syair Perahu* uses sufistic allegory to convey spiritual messages, while also containing symbols of royal splendor as a reflection of the feudal hierarchy. This shows that feudalism and Sufism are not always in conflict; Both can influence each other and produce cultural works that are rich in meaning.

However, this meeting also raises a negative side in social culture. The emergence of a culture of social resignation, which is the tendency of society to accept injustice as "destiny", is one of the impacts. Fazlur Rahman (1982) explained that this phenomenon occurs when the

ethical dimension of Sufism is ignored and only its mystical aspect remains. As a result, Sufism, which is actually liberating, serves to perpetuate the feudal structure subtly, where social injustice is accepted without criticism. On the other hand, in the modern context, the values of Sufism remain relevant as an antithesis to the new feudalism, both in the form of political elitism and religious bureaucracy. Values such as sincerity, simplicity and social justice can be used as the foundation for building a more egalitarian and civilized society. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1987) emphasizes that these sufistic principles have not lost their relevance; It can be a moral and spiritual tool to uphold justice and strengthen social ethics, while reducing the dominance of exclusive power. Thus, the legacy of the meeting between feudalism and Sufism in the archipelago is twofold. On the one hand, it forms a culture of respect, a literary work that is rich in meaning and a structured social ethic. On the other hand, it can also create a culture of social resignation if its ethical dimensions are not explored. It is important for modern society to extract liberating and egalitarian sufistic values, while at the same time realizing the risks of Sufism being institutionalized only as a tool of power legitimization.

Conclusion

Feudalism and Sufism exhibit a complex dialectical relationship that cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between domination and spirituality. While feudalism constructs social order through hierarchy, authority, and political power, Sufism emphasizes inner order through spiritual discipline, ethical refinement, and obedience aimed at self-purification rather than social domination. When grounded in its ethical and spiritual foundations, Sufism functions as a critical force that affirms egalitarian values, *zuhd*, humility, and purity of heart, redefining human dignity not by social status but by proximity to God.

However, this study also demonstrates that Sufism has historically been entangled with feudal power structures. In certain contexts, Sufi authority has been instrumentalized to legitimize political domination, producing what may be described as "spiritual feudalism"—a symbiotic relationship between rulers and religious elites that sacralizes hierarchy rather than challenges it. In the context of the Indonesian archipelago, Sufistic values have profoundly shaped social ethics, art, and literary traditions; yet, when detached from their ethical-critical dimension, these values may contribute to social resignation and passive acceptance of inequality.

The findings of this study contribute to Islamic social thought by positioning Sufism not merely as a mystical tradition, but as an ethical-spiritual framework capable of critiquing feudal mentalities and reorienting da'wah toward social justice and moral accountability. This research underscores that Sufism's emancipatory potential emerges only when its principles of *tawhid*, ethical responsibility, and spiritual equality are actively integrated into social praxis. Accordingly, Sufism offers both a moral compass for balancing power and a reflective tool for re-examining existing social structures, affirming justice, simplicity, and egalitarianism as foundational values in contemporary Islamic da'wah.

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