

Dhu al-Nun al-Misri's Contribution to the Development of Sunni Sufism

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the contribution of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri to the development of Sunni Sufism as one of the essential foundations of Islamic spirituality. Dhu al-Nun al-Misri is recognized as a prominent 9th-century Sufi figure whose profound thought focused on the relationship between humans and God through authentic inner experience. This study aims to identify the principles of Sunni Sufism taught by Dhu al-Nun al-Misri and to analyze their influence on the development of spirituality within Muslim societies, both in classical and contemporary contexts. This research employs a qualitative approach using a literature study method, drawing on various primary and secondary sources relevant to Sufism. Data collection was conducted through document analysis, while data analysis utilized a hermeneutic approach to understand the meaning and context of the teachings developed. The analytical scope focuses on key concepts in Dhu al-Nun al-Misri's thought, including ma'rifah (gnosis), mahabbah (divine love), sincerity, gratitude, and the relationship between spirituality and Islamic law (sharia), as well as their influence on later Sunni Sufi traditions. The findings reveal that the teachings of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri emphasize the importance of direct spiritual experience, sincerity, and the internalization of divine love and gratitude as the core of Sufi practice. His teachings also successfully integrate the dimensions of Islamic law (sharia) and spirituality in a harmonious manner. These findings indicate that the influence of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri's thought remains relevant today and continues to be adopted in various Sufi traditions. In conclusion, Dhu al-Nun al-Misri played a significant role in shaping the character of Sunni Sufism, which is oriented toward spiritual depth and balance with Islamic law.



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INTRODUCTION

Sufism represents the esoteric dimension of Islam that focuses on the purification of the soul (tazkiyat al-nafs) and the effort to draw closer to God through profound spiritual experience. In the Qur'an, the urgency of spiritual purification is emphasized in the verse: "He has succeeded who purifies it, and he has failed who instills it [with corruption]" (Qur'an 91:9–10). This verse indicates that the inner dimension holds a central position in Islamic teachings. In this context, Sufism emerges as a spiritual path that is not separate from sharia, but rather serves to deepen the internalization of religious teachings. One of the key figures in the early development of Sunni Sufism is Dhu al-Nun al-Misri, a 9th-century Sufi known for pioneering systematic spiritual concepts grounded in Islamic values. Despite his foundational position, scholarly discussions on Dhu al-Nun often remain fragmented, treating him mainly as a historical figure rather than as a thinker whose concepts can clarify the theological and epistemological foundations of Sunni Sufism.

From the perspective of hadith, the spiritual dimension is further emphasized through the concept of ihsan, as stated by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him): "Ihsan is to worship Allah as if you see Him, and if you do not see Him, indeed He sees you" (Sahih Muslim). This concept forms the foundational basis of Sufi practice, emphasizing inner awareness and the presence of God in every aspect of life. Dhu al-Nun al-Misri developed Sufi teachings that prioritize direct spiritual experience (dhawq), ma'rifa (gnosis), and sincerity as the core of the spiritual journey. He is also recognized for

successful integrating the dimensions of sharia and haqiqa, thus positioning Sufism not as a deviation, but as a completion of Islamic teachings.

Theoretically, scholars such as Afnan (2018) and Khan (2020) assert that Sunni Sufism is an integral part of the Islamic tradition that emphasizes a balance between the outward and inward dimensions of religion. Meanwhile, Nasr (1996) describes Sufism as the “spiritual heart of Islam,” preserving the transcendental dimension in modern human life. Schimmel (1975) further highlights that early figures such as Dhu al-Nun al-Misri played a crucial role in shaping the conceptual framework of Sufism, which later developed extensively across the Muslim world. His emphasis on divine love, gratitude, and spiritual experience establishes him as a central figure in the evolution of Sunni Sufism. Nevertheless, these studies generally emphasize the legitimacy, historical development, or universal spiritual value of Sufism, while giving limited analytical attention to Dhu al-Nun al-Misri’s specific contribution in formulating a synthesis between normative Islamic law and experiential spirituality.

However, in contemporary contexts, Sufism is often misunderstood as a practice that deviates from normative Islamic teachings. Some groups regard Sufism as an innovation (*bid’ah*) lacking a strong foundation in the Qur’an and Hadith. This misunderstanding reflects a **ضعف** (weakness) in comprehending the epistemological foundations of Sufism and a lack of in-depth studies on the contributions of early figures such as Dhu al-Nun al-Misri. On the other hand, previous studies have tended to focus on general and historical aspects of Sufism without providing a specific analysis of Dhu al-Nun’s thought within an integrative framework of sharia and spirituality. This condition reveals a research gap that necessitates a more comprehensive and in-depth study.

With the increasing spiritual crisis in the modern era, the study of Sufism has regained significant attention in academic discourse. Said (2022) argues that Sufism holds strong relevance in addressing modern human needs for meaning and inner peace. Halim (2023) also emphasizes that the revitalization of Sufi values can serve as a solution to materialism and spiritual emptiness. In this regard, the thought of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri becomes essential to revisit as a source of inspiration for developing a balanced spirituality grounded in Islamic teachings.

Based on this background, this study aims to examine in depth the contribution of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri to the development of Sunni Sufism and to analyze the principles of his teachings in constructing an integration between sharia and spirituality. Furthermore, this study seeks to explore the relevance of his teachings in the context of contemporary Muslim life. The novelty of this research lies in its analytical approach, which positions Dhu al-Nun al-Misri’s thought as a conceptual model for understanding Sunni Sufism in an integrative manner. It is therefore expected to contribute to enriching Sufi studies and to correcting misconceptions regarding Sufism within Islam.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a library research design, focusing on an in-depth examination of the thought of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri within the tradition of Sunni Sufism. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to comprehensively explore spiritual concepts through the analysis of relevant texts and literature. The corpus analyzed in this study consists of selected classical Sufi texts that explicitly discuss, transmit, or cite the teachings of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri, as well as contemporary academic studies that examine his position in the development of Sunni Sufi thought.

The data sources in this study consist of both primary and secondary materials. Primary sources include classical works containing the teachings and ideas of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri, as documented in Sufi literature or cited in the writings of prominent Sufi scholars. Secondary sources encompass books, scholarly journal articles, and contemporary academic publications that discuss Sunni Sufism and the development of Sufi thought. The selection of sources was conducted purposively, taking into account their credibility, relevance, and contribution to the research topic.

Data were collected through document analysis by identifying, classifying, and examining various literatures related to the concepts of Sunni Sufism and the thought of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri. The

collected data were then analyzed using a hermeneutic approach aimed at understanding the meaning of texts contextually and interpretatively, particularly in uncovering the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of the teachings under study.

The data analysis technique employed thematic analysis, involving the identification of key themes emerging from various sources, such as *ma'rifa*, sincerity, divine love, and the integration of sharia and *haqiqa*. The analytical process was carried out systematically through stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. To ensure the validity of the data, this study applied source triangulation by comparing multiple references to obtain a more objective and comprehensive understanding. This triangulation was carried out by comparing classical textual accounts with contemporary scholarly interpretations to identify consistency, variation, and contextual meaning in the representation of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri's thought.

Through this methodological approach, the study is expected to produce a rigorous and valid analysis of the contribution of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri in constructing the framework of Sunni Sufism, as well as its relevance to the spiritual life of contemporary Muslim society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the thought of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri has made a fundamental contribution to the formation of an integrative paradigm of Sunni Sufism, which harmoniously combines the dimensions of sharia and *haqiqa* within a unified spiritual framework. An analysis of classical and contemporary literature reveals that the main concepts developed include *ma'rifa* (gnosis), *mahabbah* (divine love), gratitude, and the practice of *dhikr* as a means of spiritual purification. These findings demonstrate that Sufism is not merely an ascetic practice, but rather a structured and applicable spiritual system in human life.

The concept of *ma'rifa* as the core of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri's teachings suggests that true knowledge of God is attained through profound inner experience. This is in line with the Qur'anic verse: "And fear Allah, and Allah will teach you" (Qur'an 2:282), which emphasizes the relationship between piety and spiritual knowledge. From the perspective of hadith, this concept is reinforced by the teaching of *ihsan* (Sahih Muslim), which underscores awareness of God's presence in all human activities. Academically, this finding is supported by studies such as Knysh (2017) and Ernst (2018), which argue that spiritual experience constitutes the core epistemology of Sufism.

Furthermore, the teachings of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri emphasize divine love as the foundation of the relationship between humans and God. This is consistent with the Qur'anic statement: "But those who believe are stronger in love for Allah" (Qur'an 2:165). In contemporary scholarship, Chittick (2016) and Nasr (2017) affirm that the concept of love in Sufism serves as a transformative force that leads individuals toward transcendental awareness. The findings of this study also reveal that the practice of *dhikr* has significant psychological implications, as highlighted in Qur'an 13:28 regarding the tranquility of the heart. Modern studies by Kamali (2020) and Halim (2023) further support the view that Islamic spirituality, including Sufism, plays a crucial role in maintaining mental health and emotional balance.

To clarify the research findings, the following table presents a synthesis of the main concepts identified:

Table 1. Synthesis of the Main Teachings of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri

No.	Concept	Description of Findings	Recent References	Implications
1	<i>Ma'rifa</i>	Knowledge of God through inner spiritual experience	Knysh (2017), Ernst (2018)	High spiritual awareness
2	<i>Mahabbah</i>	Divine love as the foundation of the human-God relationship	Chittick (2016), Nasr (2017)	Spiritual transformation

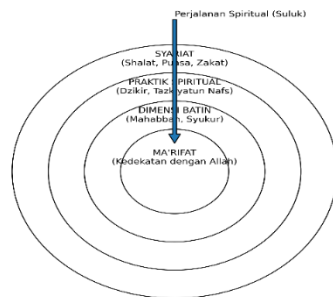
No.	Concept	Description of Findings	Recent References	Implications
3	<i>Dhikr</i>	Continuous remembrance of God	Kamali (2020), Halim (2023)	Psychological tranquility
4	Gratitude (<i>Shukr</i>)	Acceptance of divine decree	Said (2022)	Emotional stability
5	Integration of <i>Sharia</i> and <i>Haqiqa</i>	Balance between outward and inward dimensions	Zuhdi (2019), Rahman (2021)	Holistic religiosity

Based on the table above, it is evident that the teachings of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri possess strong relevance in the contemporary context. They are not only a historical legacy but also serve as a spiritual solution in addressing the challenges of modernity. Rahman (2021) demonstrates that an integrative Sufi approach is capable of bridging the gap between formal religiosity and the individual's spiritual needs.

To strengthen the conceptual framework, the following presents the model of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri's teachings:

Figure

To strengthen the conceptual framework, the following presents the model of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri's teachings.



Supporting Textual Evidence

- Qur'an 13:28: *Dhikr* leads to tranquility of the heart
- b. Qur'an 2:165: Emphasis on love for Allah
- c. Sahih Muslim: The concept of *ihسان*

Furthermore, the findings of this study also reveal the existence of criticisms toward the Sufi approach, which is often perceived as placing excessive emphasis on the inner dimension. However, Dhu al-Nun al-Misri firmly asserted that all spiritual experiences must remain grounded in the Qur'an and Hadith. In this context, Kamali (2020) argues that Sunni Sufism represents the internalization of sharia values rather than a deviation from them.

In the global context, the relevance of these teachings has become increasingly evident. Halim (2023) and Said (2022) highlight that modern individuals are experiencing a crisis of meaning due to the dominance of materialism. Sufism, particularly the teachings of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri, offers a solution through a spiritual approach that emphasizes balance between worldly life and the hereafter. Therefore, the contribution of Dhu al-Nun is not merely historical but also transformative in addressing contemporary challenges.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion, it can be concluded that Dhu al-Nun al-Misri played a fundamental role in shaping an integrative paradigm of Sunni Sufism, which harmoniously combines the dimensions of sharia and spirituality. His teachings not only emphasize ritual religious practices but also highlight the importance of inner experience as the core of the journey toward closeness to God. The key concepts he developed, such as ma'rifa, mahabbah, gratitude, and the practice of dhikr, demonstrate that Sufism constitutes a comprehensive and applicable spiritual system in human life.

Furthermore, this study affirms that the thought of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri successfully formulates a Sufi framework that is not in contradiction with the Qur'an and Hadith, but rather reinforces the dimension of ihsan within Islamic teachings. The integration of sharia and haqiqa that he proposed serves as an essential foundation for constructing a balanced religiosity, in which outward practices are supported by deep inner awareness. Thus, Sunni Sufism as developed by Dhu al-Nun al-Misri can be understood as a form of holistic internalization of Islamic values.

In the contemporary context, the teachings of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri demonstrate significant relevance in addressing the spiritual crisis faced by modern humanity. Values such as sincerity, divine love, and spiritual awareness offer alternative solutions to the dominance of materialism and the loss of meaning in life. Therefore, the contribution of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri is not merely historical but also transformative and contextually relevant in responding to contemporary challenges.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes that Sunni Sufism, as articulated by Dhu al-Nun al-Misri, represents a holistic and sustainable spiritual model for fostering the relationship between humans and God. These findings further reinforce the position of Sufism as an integral part of the Islamic intellectual tradition, with a significant contribution to the development of authentic and timeless spirituality.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest that could have influenced the objectivity of this article. All information, interpretations, and analyses of the thought of Dhu al-Nun al-Misri were conducted independently, based on scholarly inquiry and reliable sources. This article is prepared solely for the advancement of academic knowledge in the field of Sufi studies, particularly in exploring the characteristics of Sunni Sufism as represented by prominent figures such as Dhu al-Nun al-Misri. The author did not receive any funding, sponsorship, or institutional affiliation that could potentially create bias in the preparation of this work.

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