

Lived Social Sufism beyond Institutions: Non-Institutional Charismatic Authority in Contemporary Indonesian Islam

Muniron^{1*}, Fidia Astuti², Faiz Marikar³

¹ UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri, Indonesia; e-mail: muniron@uinkediri.ac.id

² UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri, Indonesia; e-mail: fidia@uinkediri.ac.id

³ General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka; e-mail: faiz.marikar@fulbrightmail.org

* Correspondence

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Abstract: This study examines the life of KH Dauglas Toha Yahya (Gus Lik) as a contemporary expression of non-institutional social Sufism in Indonesia. Over the past two decades, the rise of symbolic religiosity, the popularity of celebrity preachers, and the commodification of religion have created a gap between outward religious expressions and substantive forms of social piety. This study aims to explain how Gus Lik's everyday practices present an alternative model of religiosity rooted in simplicity, social proximity, and service to the community. Using a qualitative design and a historical-hermeneutic framework, the study draws on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using content and thematic analysis. The main findings identify three central patterns: first, Sufi asceticism (*zuhud*), manifested in a minimalist lifestyle, rejection of wealth and privileges, and closeness to marginalized groups; second, *ta'dzim* toward one's teacher, which forms moral ethos, emotional discipline, and non-institutional charismatic authority; and third, *khidmah* (social service), reflected in direct engagement with the community, the formation of horizontal solidarity, and the creation of inclusive religious spaces. The study's implications indicate that these Sufi values can play a significant role in strengthening social cohesion, offering critique against the commodification of spirituality, and presenting a model of religious leadership grounded in ethical exemplarity. The originality of this study lies in its systematic mapping of a contemporary Sufi figure who has received limited scholarly attention, as well as the formulation of a typology of "social Sufism" as a theoretical contribution to religious studies in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Charismatic authority; Gus Lik; lived religion; religious community; social Sufism.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini menganalisis kehidupan KH Dauglas Toha Yahya (Gus Lik) sebagai bentuk ekspresi sufisme sosial non-institusional di Indonesia. Dalam dua dekade terakhir, meningkatnya religiositas simbolik, popularitas pendakwah selebritas, dan komodifikasi agama telah menciptakan jarak antara ekspresi keagamaan dan praktik kesalehan sosial yang substantif. Penelitian ini bertujuan menjelaskan bagaimana praktik keseharian Gus Lik menghadirkan model religiositas alternatif yang berakar pada kesederhanaan, kedekatan sosial, dan pengabdian kepada masyarakat. Menggunakan desain kualitatif dan kerangka kerja historis-hermeneutik, penelitian ini memanfaatkan wawancara mendalam, pengamatan partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis konten dan analisis tematik. Temuan utama penelitian mengidentifikasi tiga pola sentral: pertama, asketisme sufistik (*zuhud*) yang diwujudkan melalui gaya hidup minimalis, penolakan terhadap harta dan fasilitas, serta kedekatan dengan kelompok marjinal; kedua, *ta'dzim* kepada guru, yang membentuk etos moral, disiplin emosional, dan otoritas karismatik non-institusional; dan ketiga, *khidmah* sosial, berupa pelayanan langsung kepada masyarakat, pembentukan solidaritas horizontal, serta penciptaan ruang keagamaan yang inklusif. Implikasi penelitian menunjukkan bahwa nilai-nilai sufistik tersebut dapat berperan penting dalam memperkuat kohesi sosial, menghadirkan kritik terhadap komersialisasi spiritualitas, dan menawarkan model kepemimpinan keagamaan berbasis keteladanan. Orisinalitas penelitian terletak pada pemetaan sistematis terhadap figur sufi

kontemporer yang belum banyak dikaji, serta perumusan tipologi “sufisme sosial” sebagai kontribusi teoretis bagi kajian agama di Asia Tenggara.

Kata kunci: Otoritas karismatik; Gus Lik; agama yang dijalani; komunitas agama; Sufisme sosial.

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, Indonesia has experienced a significant rise in public religious expression, marked by the proliferation of symbolic religiosity, the growing influence of celebrity preachers, and the commodification of religion in the media. Although these expressions make religiosity more visible, they do not necessarily correspond to an increase in substantive social piety. The latest 2023 Social Piety Index (IKS) released by the Research and Training Agency of the Ministry of Religious Affairs reports a national average score of 82.59, categorized as very good (Chomsah, 2023). The survey involved 1,610 respondents across 20 districts/cities using clustered random sampling, analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with a 95 percent confidence level and a 2.1 percent margin of error. Nevertheless, the distribution across its five dimensions reveals an imbalance: the dimension of Ethics and Moral Conduct scored highest at 88.02, followed by Relations with the State and Government (86.06), while transformative indicators of social piety such as Social Concern/Solidarity (80.41) and Interpersonal Relations (Diversity) (78.19) lag behind (Chomsah, 2023). This pattern suggests that the strength of religious life in Indonesia tends to rest on moral-formal dimensions rather than on social practices grounded in empathy and solidarity.

These findings align with the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ analysis that rising religious expression does not always translate into improved social interaction across groups. At the same time, the national score of 83.257 in the Religious Affairs Office (KUA) Service Satisfaction Index indicates that administrative revitalization has been effective (Chomsah, 2023). Yet high satisfaction in administrative services does not necessarily reflect a deeper substantive spirituality. The gap between performative religiosity and social piety points to the risk that spirituality becomes trapped within ceremonial frameworks, failing to touch the depth of social empathy or communal solidarity. In the context of weakening solidarity, rising consumerism, and intensifying social alienation in Indonesia’s urban environments, the need for a more grounded, ethical, and transformative model of religiosity becomes increasingly urgent.

It is in this context that Sufism—with its emphasis on purification of the soul, simplicity, empathy, and service to others—offers an alternative approach to contemporary religiosity. Values such as *zuhud* (asceticism), *ta’dzim* toward one’s teacher, and *khidmah* (social service) provide a spiritual foundation that is at once theological and social. Forms of religiosity rooted in everyday embodied practice, or *lived religion*, thus become essential objects of inquiry, especially through local figures such as KH Dauglas Toha Yahya (Gus Lik), who represents a non-institutional and socially oriented model of Sufism in response to symbolic religiosity and the commodification of spirituality in Indonesia.

Research on religion, spirituality, and social dynamics in Indonesia has developed in several directions. First, studies on religious leadership highlight the significant influence of *ulama* and *kiai* on the social and cultural life of Indonesian Muslim communities (Azra & Hasan, 2002; Mudzhar, 1995). However, most of these studies focus on figures within formal institutional structures—such as pesantren, Islamic organizations, or dakwah institutions—and tend to overlook non-institutional spiritual figures who exert strong influence at grassroots levels. Second, studies on Islamic spirituality amid contemporary social change argue that spiritual values can counterbalance growing individualism and consumerism (Hefner, 2000; Wahid, 1984). Yet these studies remain largely conceptual or institution-based and seldom explore how everyday Sufi practices—outside formal *tariqa* structures—generate social solidarity and collective piety. Third, studies on religion and marginalized groups demonstrate that religion plays an important role in strengthening poor and vulnerable communities (Umanailo & Chairul, 2014; Wibisono, 2021). However, this body of research rarely

integrates sufistic dimensions or examines non-institutional forms of spirituality as mechanisms of social empowerment.

Taken together, these strands reveal a gap in the literature regarding how non-institutional Sufism—practiced through everyday life—can shape religious communities, reinforce social piety, and offer alternative models of religiosity amid contemporary consumerist culture. Studies on *lived Sufism* among local figures such as Gus Lik remain scarce, even though his practices of asceticism, social solidarity, and simplicity carry significant socioreligious value that can enrich the study of religion and society.

This study aims to analyze how the sufistic practices of KH Dauglas Toha Yahya (Gus Lik) shape a grounded and socially oriented model of religiosity. Specifically, it seeks to fill the existing research gap by examining how Gus Lik's *lived Sufism*—unaffiliated with any formal *tariqa* structure—contributes to the formation of religious communities, the strengthening of social piety, and the symbolic resistance to materialistic culture in urban Indonesia.

The study argues that the form of Sufism practiced by Gus Lik represents a model of social Sufism capable of bridging personal spirituality and social engagement. This model rests on three central pillars. First, consistent Sufi asceticism serves as a moral critique of commodified dakwah and consumerist culture, while providing an ethical foundation for a simple life embedded within the everyday realities of the urban poor. Second, *ta'dzim* toward one's teacher shapes non-institutional charismatic authority, wherein Gus Lik's spiritual legitimacy derives not from formal structures but from the continuity of values, sincerity, and moral integrity inherited from KH Marzuki Dahlan. Third, organically enacted *khidmah* anchors spirituality in concrete social praxis—from accompanying marginalized groups and mobilizing community *gotong royong* to fostering cross-class solidarity within pengajian spaces. Through these dynamics, Gus Lik's *lived Sufism* emerges not merely as an alternative form of religiosity but as a transformative socio-religious framework capable of addressing contemporary crises of solidarity, consumerism, and social fragmentation in Indonesia.

2. Method

The unit of analysis in this study is the religious life of KH Dauglas Toha Yahya (Gus Lik) as a contemporary Sufi figure in Kediri, East Java, Indonesia. The research focuses on the sufistic practices embodied by Gus Lik, the spiritual values he internalized, and the socioreligious contributions that emerged within the community formed around him. The analysis examines how his everyday *lived religion*—characterized by ascetic, social, and non-institutional practices—shaped a model of social Sufism and influenced the dynamics of the local religious community.

This study employs a qualitative design using a historical-hermeneutic analytical framework. This approach enables the researcher to interpret symbolic meanings, religious experiences, and sufistic practices through a deep engagement with texts, actions, and life narratives. Gadamer's hermeneutic tradition (1975) guides the interpretation of Gus Lik's teachings, practices, and spiritual experiences through a *fusion of horizons* between the researcher and the socio-historical context of the subject. A single revelatory case study design was selected because Gus Lik represents a unique figure who exemplifies a rarely examined form of non-institutional Sufism within Indonesian Sufi studies (Palmer, 1980).

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data included: first, in-depth interviews with five key informants who had direct relationships with Gus Lik—two *santri*, one family member, and two community members; second, participant observations of community activities and sufistic practices at Pondok Pesantren Assa'idiyah Jamsaren, Kediri; and third, internal biographical documents, pesantren records, recordings of *pengajian*, and Gus Lik's teachings in audio, video, and written form. Secondary sources included literature on Indonesian Sufism, biographies of Nusantara Sufi figures, and previous research on Javanese religious practices (Maghfur Ahmad, Abdul Aziz, 2021; Rasyid, 2022; Van Bruinessen, 1995).

Data collection employed three main techniques. First, a literature review was conducted to establish the theoretical foundations of Sufism, *tarekat*, and *lived religion* in Indonesia. Second, in-depth

semi-structured interviews were carried out with five informants selected through purposive sampling based on their emotional proximity, direct experience, and deep knowledge of Gus Lik. All interviews were conducted in the local language, recorded, transcribed, and verified through member checking. Third, participant observation was conducted over five months (August–December 2024) at Pondok Pesantren Assa'idiyah, the center of Gus Lik's spiritual activities. The observation included routine rituals, Wednesday Night and Friday Night *pengajian*, social activities of the pesantren, and community interactions that continue to sustain Gus Lik's sufistic values. Research instruments consisted of interview guides, field notes, and photographic, audio, and video documentation.

Data analysis was supported by NVivo and undertaken in two stages. The first stage involved content analysis of sermons, writings, and recorded teachings of Gus Lik to identify dominant spiritual messages and social values. The second stage consisted of thematic analysis of interview transcripts and observational notes through open coding, categorization, and theme development across data sources. *In vivo* coding was used to retain the authenticity of informants' terminology. The analysis process was iterative and supported by analytic memos and coding stripes to ensure interpretive traceability. Data credibility was maintained through source and methodological triangulation, member checking, rich contextual description, an audit trail of analytical procedures, and researcher reflexivity to minimize bias. This study is contextual and is not intended for broad generalization; rather, it aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how Gus Lik's sufistic values were internalized and enacted within a local community.

3. Results

Sufistic Asceticism: Simplicity as a Spiritual Practice and a Communal Identity

KH Moch. Douglas Toha Yahya, widely known as Gus Lik, served as the caretaker of Pondok Pesantren Assa'idiyah Jamsaren, Kediri, and was the son of the respected ulama, KH Said and Nyai Maemunah of Banjar Mlati. Raised in a pesantren environment steeped in religious scholarship, he grew into a figure admired not only for his knowledge but also for his simplicity, sincerity, and closeness to ordinary people. Throughout his life, he guided thousands of followers through the Wednesday Night and Friday Night *pengajian* and became a spiritual reference for communities in Kediri and surrounding regions. His passing on 21 September 2024 at the age of 58, after intensive care at RS Bhayangkara Kediri, brought profound grief to his family, students, and the many followers who had long witnessed the radiance of his character and gentle moral conduct. He is remembered as a *zuhud*, humble, and devoted scholar whose charismatic presence extended far beyond formal religious structures.

Asceticism (*zuhud*) emerges as a central theme in narratives about the life of KH Dauglas Toha Yahya (Gus Lik). In-depth interviews, field observations, and written as well as audiovisual documentation consistently describe simplicity not merely as part of his personality but as the spiritual and pedagogical foundation that shaped the entire community around him. This simplicity manifested in a highly minimalistic lifestyle, disciplined eating habits, rejection of material possessions, and intentional proximity to marginalized groups.

The findings indicate that Gus Lik's ascetic orientation developed early in life and remained consistent until his death. In an interview, Dewi, a community member living near Pondok Pesantren Assa'idiyah Jamsaren, explained that Gus Lik had long limited his meals to small portions. She recounted hearing directly from him in *pengajian* and daily interactions that for him, eating served only to strengthen the body for worship and service, not to satisfy desire (Interview, 18 October 2024). This explanation shows that self-restraint in consumption was an integral spiritual practice rather than a mere personal habit.

Another finding highlights that asceticism was not only a moral principle but a lifelong pattern that defined Gus Lik's identity. Rofiq, a family member, noted that Gus Lik always maintained a remarkably simple diet. He stated that even when delicious and abundant dishes were available, Gus Lik consistently took only small portions and avoided excess (Interview, 18 October 2024). This habit

reveals not only strong self-control but also a deep understanding of eating as a functional act rather than a pursuit of pleasure.

This ascetic disposition became even more evident in relation to wealth. Rofiq also recounted that Gus Lik frequently articulated his belief that wealth could obstruct spiritual clarity. He explained that Gus Lik repeatedly expressed that he did not need any form of material possession to draw closer to God. This attitude appeared in his habitual rejection of large gifts, including honorarium envelopes prepared for him at various events. For Gus Lik, receiving substantial financial offerings or special facilities risked compromising the sincerity of worship and diluting moral intention (Interview, 18 October 2024).

Pesantren documentation reinforces this portrayal of simplicity. Although his students prepared a more comfortable private room for him, Gus Lik consistently chose to stay in a small space behind the kitchen, sleeping on a thin mat without luxurious furniture. This choice demonstrates that asceticism, for him, was not symbolic performance but a lived spiritual commitment. His extreme simplicity became not only his personal hallmark but also a model for students and followers, illustrating how simplicity functioned as a path toward divine closeness and moral integrity.

These findings show that Gus Lik's asceticism was not a withdrawal from the world but an active expression of spiritual awareness—a moral critique of the increasingly consumptive and commercialized religious culture in contemporary Indonesia. His simplicity served as a powerful symbolic message, especially for students and followers who directly witnessed how ascetic practice could bring one closer to God.

Interviews with Rofiq further clarify that Gus Lik's asceticism functioned as a moral critique of contemporary *dakwah*, which he believed had become entangled in commercialization and image cultivation. According to Rofiq, Gus Lik often voiced his concern that modern *dakwah* tended to fixate on performance, facilities, and public image, distancing preachers from the spiritual essence of preaching. His refusal of special accommodations, honoraria, and excessive displays of respect, therefore, was not only personal modesty but a subtle indication that true *dakwah* should not rely on luxury or spectacle. For Gus Lik, as relayed by Rofiq, the strength of *dakwah* lies in sincerity, exemplary conduct, and everyday religious practice rather than in worldly symbolism (Interview, 18 October 2024). This testimony shows that his asceticism operated as a moral counter-narrative to the commercialization of religion in contemporary preaching, and as an attempt to restore *dakwah* to its foundations of sincerity, humility, and social righteousness.

The consistency of his asceticism demonstrates a spiritual stability rarely found in contemporary religious public figures. His simple life reflects a deep internalization of the classical Sufi concept of *zuhud*—minimizing dependence on the world to maintain clarity of heart and focus on worship (Piraino, 2023; Van Bruinessen, 2009)

Family observations also affirm his simplicity and sincerity in daily life. His sister, Mbah Mamik, emphasized that Gus Lik was not only modest in lifestyle but profoundly humble and socially sensitive. She explained that he always tried not to burden others, especially when visiting or teaching at *pengajian*. His attentiveness to his followers was also evident in his practice of taking home lists of names of individuals who requested prayers. According to Mbah Mamik, "All his followers were always prayed for... I once asked why he re-read and prayed for them again, and he said he feared missing someone." This habit illustrates that his asceticism extended beyond material restraint to an inner devotion to safeguarding the spiritual well-being of others, including small traders, parking attendants, and newcomers who attended only once (Sidqi, 2024a).

The exemplary nature of Gus Lik's asceticism also appears in testimonies from young ulama and religious officials. Gus Reza Ahmad Zahid of Pondok Pesantren Al-Mahrusiyah stated that Gus Lik was "patient in nurturing the community, consistent in teaching, and always delivered lessons that were current and easy to understand." This testimony shows that his simplicity did not diminish the depth of his knowledge; instead, it enabled his teachings to resonate across diverse social groups. A similar assessment came from A. Zamroni, Acting Head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs Office in Kediri, who accompanied Gus Lik during the 2023 pilgrimage. Zamroni explained that Gus Lik

consistently refused special facilities reserved for religious elites and preferred to mingle with ordinary pilgrims. He stated, “He thought deeply about the ummah... instead of taking privileges, he chose to stay with the other pilgrims. Such a person is rare.” (Sidqi, 2024a). These testimonies reinforce the finding that his asceticism was not merely personal spirituality but a widely recognized social commitment, making him a respected model across generations.

Taken together, these findings reveal several recurring patterns. First, asceticism functioned as social critique, particularly against the commercialization of *dakwah* and symbolic religiosity. Through his simple life, Gus Lik offered an alternative religious practice grounded in substance rather than popularity or material reward. Second, asceticism served as spiritual pedagogy, shaping the habitus of his students to remain humble and avoid pursuing social status. Third, asceticism operated relationally, fostering emotional and social proximity to the poor and marginalized communities he frequently visited. Fourth, asceticism manifested as *lived religion*, expressed through everyday acts rather than rhetorical or formal ritual display.

Thus, Gus Lik’s asceticism reflects not only the inner dimensions of Sufism but also forms the collective identity of the community around him. These findings deepen the study of Indonesian Sufism by providing a concrete example of how sufistic values can be lived out in everyday life and generate significant social impact.

Ta’dzim Toward the Teacher and the Formation of Non-Institutional Charismatic Authority

The findings show that the dimension of *ta’dzim*—a deep reverence for one’s teacher—forms one of the central pillars shaping Gus Lik’s charismatic authority and binding the surrounding community to him. Interviews with students (*santri*) and family members reveal that the spiritual bond between Gus Lik and his teacher, KH Marzuki Dahlan of Lirboyo, extended far beyond an intellectual relationship. Informants consistently described it as an emotional and spiritual connection of remarkable depth. Haq, a senior *santri* at Pondok Pesantren Assa’idiyah Jamsaren, stated that Gus Lik would often become visibly emotional whenever he mentioned his teacher’s name, reflecting a genuine and profound sense of love and veneration (Interview, 18 September 2024). Field observations further show that every *pengajian*, *haul*, and *ziarah* led by Gus Lik was always opened with a prayer dedicated to the teachers within his spiritual lineage (*sanad*). This tradition continues even after his passing, as part of the community’s commitment to honoring his spiritual heritage. Internal pesantren notes also indicate that Gus Lik repeatedly emphasized the importance of “walking in the footsteps of the teacher’s heart” as the foundation of one’s spiritual journey.

Students and family members also recognized that this reverence toward his teacher formed the core of Gus Lik’s spiritual authority. Students recalled that he often reminded them that knowledge holds no meaning without the guidance and *barakah* of a teacher. This view is consistent with the community’s observation that the sincerity, humility, and integrity that characterized Gus Lik reflected the spiritual legacy transmitted from his teacher, KH Marzuki Dahlan. Rofiq, a family member, affirmed that the blessings in Gus Lik’s knowledge and spiritual conduct were believed to stem from his deep love and unwavering obedience to his teacher. As a result, his moral authority was understood as a direct continuation of his teacher’s spiritual lineage (Interview, 18 October 2024). These narratives reveal that *ta’dzim* was not a personal courtesy but a fundamental element in shaping his character and the primary source of his charismatic legitimacy in the eyes of students and the community.

Family testimonies and reflections from respected ulama further reinforce how *ta’dzim* shaped Gus Lik’s non-institutional charisma and became a communal identity passed down to his followers. KH Anwar Iskandar, his brother-in-law and the Head of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) of Kediri, emphasized that all *pengajian* Gus Lik founded—PMJ, PMR, and women’s study circles—would continue as a way of preserving the spiritual legacy of his teacher. This continuation underscores that his teachings are not only respected but seen as deserving of sustained care and transmission. Family members also explained that *ta’dzim* and Gus Lik’s dedication to *dakwah* were the sources of his spiritual steadfastness. Mbah Mamik recalled that he would insist on teaching even when ill, once saying, “*Kewajibanku ki ngaji ngekeki pencerahan umat kok mbok larang terus piye?*” (“My duty is to teach and

enlighten the ummah—why would you stop me?”). This narrative shows that his loyalty to his teacher shaped his loyalty to the community: to honor one’s teacher means to continue the entrusted spiritual mission (Sidqi, 2024b). The diversity of those attending his *pengajian*—from *santri* and laborers to ordinary townspeople—demonstrates that his charisma operated inclusively, rooted not in formal structure but in exemplary conduct and emotional warmth. In this sense, *ta’dzim* functioned not merely as a teaching but as a model of spiritual leadership embodied and practiced collectively.

The significance of *ta’dzim* as the core of Gus Lik’s charismatic authority also appears in testimonies from community leaders and ulama attending his first *Haul*. The Mayor of Kediri, Vinanda Prameswati, described Gus Lik’s teachings—especially his humility, patience, tolerance, and commitment to social harmony—as moral examples that continue to guide the community. She referred to him as “an educator, a motivator, and a warrior of the faith,” whose exemplary conduct should inspire daily life (Pemkot Kediri, 2025). The presence of prominent ulama such as KH Anwar Iskandar, KH Abdul Hamid, and KH Syaifuddin at the *haul* affirmed that his spiritual leadership was widely respected, even though he never positioned himself within a formal *tarekat*. In *pesantren* tradition, reverence for one’s teacher is central to spiritual development, and the community perceived that Gus Lik not only taught this principle but lived it consistently through every *pengajian*, *ziarah*, and daily action. Prayer for one’s teachers always opened his gatherings, and this practice continues after his passing as an expression of unbroken spiritual fidelity.

Within this framework, the strong teacher–student bond manifests in four layers of core values. First, spiritual formation: the teacher serves as the primary guide toward closeness to God. Second, emotional reverence: evident in the heartfelt way Gus Lik mentioned his teacher’s name. Third, value transmission: the internalization of the teacher’s Sufi principles in Gus Lik’s moral character and daily conduct. Fourth, the integration of knowledge and ethics: reverence for the teacher shaped not only intellectual development but also moral and spiritual depth. These findings show that the teacher–student relationship was not merely academic but a process of spiritual character formation transmitted across generations.

In Sufi tradition, the authority of the *mursyid* strongly determines the direction and depth of the disciple’s spiritual journey. The findings align with the *pesantren* context in Indonesia, where the relationship between *kiai* and *santri* is not only hierarchical but also deeply affective and reciprocal. As described by Deighton-Mohammed (2024), the teacher is regarded as a moral exemplar shaping knowledge, personality, and communal character. In this context, Gus Lik’s authority did not emerge from a formal *tarekat* position or institutional title but from his moral example, integrity, and emotional closeness to his students. His students viewed *ta’dzim* not as ritual etiquette but as their collective spiritual identity—a shared conviction that the path to God cannot be separated from profound respect for the person who guides them.

These findings demonstrate that Gus Lik’s authority was non-institutional but deeply influential. First, his authority grew out of emotional intimacy and personal warmth rather than formal structures. Second, the teacher–student relationship was reproduced through routine practices such as *pengajian*, *haul*, and *ziarah*, allowing Sufi tradition to remain alive and relevant in a contemporary setting. Third, *ta’dzim* functioned as a collective identity that fostered internal solidarity. Fourth, his charisma was affective and transformative, encouraging followers to imitate him not because of institutional authority but because of his moral example. Thus, *ta’dzim* operated as a cultural mechanism sustaining Gus Lik’s charismatic authority and ensuring the continuity of his religious community.

Social Khidmah and the Formation of Community-Based Social Sufism

Field findings demonstrate that the dimension of *khidmah* (social service) constitutes the central virtue in Gus Lik’s religious practice and serves as the foundation for the formation of a vibrant and community-rooted model of social Sufism. Interviews show that Gus Lik cultivated a strong sense of closeness with poor and marginalized groups. He regularly offered direct assistance to the destitute, purchased medicine for sick neighbors, distributed food to residents, and mobilized *santri* to carry out communal work. One community member explained the key principle Gus Lik often emphasized:

“Beragama itu ya ngopeni wong cilik”—“To practice religion is to care for the little people” (Dewi, Interview, October 2024). This statement affirms that genuine religiosity is expressed through concrete acts of social care rather than ritual performance alone.

The research further shows that this social commitment did not take a programmatic or formalized form typical of modern pesantren activities. Instead, it unfolded organically, spontaneously, and as an inseparable part of daily life. Students involved in PMR recounted that each *pengajian*—whether the Wednesday Night Gathering (PMR) or the Friday Night Gathering (PMJ)—would almost always conclude with the distribution of boxed meals to surrounding residents. This activity was never designed as a structural program but functioned as a spiritual practice that taught the community that authentic spirituality must descend into worldly concerns through tangible care for others.

Interviews with students also indicate that Gus Lik transmitted social values not primarily through lectures but through moral example and direct involvement. Students frequently accompanied him on visits to the homes of impoverished residents, where they offered both material assistance and emotional support. One student explained that Gus Lik consistently encouraged the *santri* to “go down to the grassroots” in order to experience the real social conditions of the wider community. From a Sufi perspective, this practice reflects a form of social *zuhud*—a deliberate withdrawal from hierarchical status in order to cultivate proximity to vulnerable groups (Satrio Adi, Interview, 30 September 2024). This approach illustrates that spirituality was not confined to personal contemplation but intertwined with concrete forms of social service.

Evidence of Gus Lik’s social *khidmah* also emerged from the broader Kediri community, which affirmed that social service was one of his most defining characteristics and a key reason for his widespread affection among the public. The *pengajian* he led—whether PMR at the pesantren or PMJ held across various regions—were consistently attended by tens of thousands of participants. Even in remote villages, crowds continued to gather in overwhelming numbers, indicating that his closeness to the people transcended geographic and social boundaries. This diverse gathering also generated small-scale economic impacts: many small vendors depended on these events for their livelihoods. Mbok Ti, a 60-year-old seller of coffee and fried snacks, expressed gratitude for being able to *ngalap berkah* (“seek blessings”) while following the *pengajian* circuit to places such as Trenggalek, Ponorogo, and other remote villages. She explained that being near Gus Lik made her feel accompanied by blessing and inner calm, showing that his charisma resonated not only spiritually but also socio-economically within the micro-communities that surrounded him (Sholeh, 2024).

Testimonies from relatives and community figures further reinforce that Gus Lik’s social practice was deeply rooted in sincerity and ascetic discipline. His cousin, KH Ahmad Sholeh Abdul Jalil, described him as someone who ate extremely little—only one-third of the portion typically consumed by others—reflecting the intensity of his ascetic discipline. This practice did not function as an individualistic retreat but as part of his commitment to staying close to the poor and working class. Many residents recounted that Gus Lik often mingled effortlessly with pedicab drivers, small vendors, and laborers without maintaining any social distance. In many cases, they did not even realize that the simple man speaking with them was a highly respected *kiai* followed by thousands. This proximity produced a highly heterogeneous following whose social spectrum far surpassed the traditional *santri* community (Sholeh, 2024).

Gus Lik’s lifelong decision to remain unmarried was also understood by his followers as an expression of *mahabbah* and total dedication to God and to the community. Members of PMJ explained that, given the size of his following, it would have been easy for him to marry, yet he chose celibacy so that all his energy could focus on social service and spiritual guidance. His attitude toward money further reinforced this impression. Numerous stories circulate about envelopes of money left untouched in his room. For followers and relatives, this illustrated that his devotion was free from personal interest. Thus, when he passed away, the people of Kediri experienced profound grief—mourning the loss of a *kiai* who embodied asceticism, simplicity, and a calming presence amid society’s many challenges.

Triangulated data from the wider community also affirm that *khidmah* served as a hallmark of Gus Lik's Sufism. One of the most powerful testimonies came from Ahmad Humaidi Rozy, the caretaker of Masjid Rusunawa Dandangan, Kediri, who recalled an experience that deepened his conviction in Gus Lik's moral and spiritual presence. During an *Isra' Mi'raj* commemoration in 2019, heavy rain flooded the mosque courtyard. Humaidi was told to retrieve a tarp from Gus Lik's home. He recounted that when he returned, Gus Lik had already arrived at the mosque and, in an uncanny turn of events, the heavy rain stopped abruptly and the puddles vanished (Nanang, 2022). He emphasized that he did not interpret this solely as a physical occurrence but as a sign of Gus Lik's spiritual distinction. The hundreds of attendees that night described a profound sense of devotion, with many bursting into tears in unison (Hanifah, 2024).

Although this testimony carries a charismatic tone, this study does not interpret it as evidence of supernatural intervention. Instead, it is approached as social testimony demonstrating how the community perceived Gus Lik as a source of comfort, moral example, and spiritual intimacy. In the study of lived religion (McGuire, 2008), such perceptions constitute a form of moral legitimacy that strengthens the position of a non-institutional spiritual leader.

Table 1. Social *Khidmah* and Gus Lik's Social Sufism

Aspect of Social <i>Khidmah</i>	Evidence	Interpretation
Closeness to the poor	Assisting the destitute, purchasing medicine, visiting sick neighbors, distributing food; <i>jamaah</i> drawn from working-class and marginalized communities	<i>Khidmah</i> as an expression of social <i>zuhud</i> : emotional and social proximity to vulnerable groups
<i>Pengajian</i> as a space of social service	PMR and PMJ consistently conclude with meal distribution; tens of thousands attend from diverse backgrounds; economic benefits for small vendors	Religious community formed through participatory rituals rather than formal institutions—an inclusive religiosity
Social mobilization and communal work	Encouraging students to “ <i>turun ke bawah</i> ”; visiting impoverished households; joint communal work with <i>santri</i>	The teacher as a catalyst of social solidarity; moral education occurs through direct practice
Socioeconomic impact of <i>pengajian</i>	Vendors follow the <i>pengajian</i> circuit to Trenggalek–Ponorogo; they seek <i>ngalap berkah</i> and feel peaceful near Gus Lik	Social Sufism produces not only spiritual impact but also micro-economic opportunities for marginalized groups
Social asceticism (unmarried & unattached to wealth)	Remaining unmarried to focus on <i>dakwah</i> ; envelopes of money left untouched; extremely simple lifestyle	Personal sacrifice as total commitment to communal service; moral legitimacy increases
No social distance from the poor	Frequently mingling with pedicab drivers, street vendors, and laborers without distinction	Social authority built through humility and proximity, not hierarchy
Social charisma (collective spiritual experience)	Reports of rain stopping during <i>pengajian</i> ; collective weeping and deep devotion	Collective perception creates non-institutional charismatic legitimacy; lived religion shaped through emotional experience
Massive and heterogeneous <i>jamaah</i>	Tens of thousands attend from varied socioeconomic backgrounds and remote villages	Social Sufism transcends social class, geography, and hierarchy

		→ an inclusive and populist model of religiosity
<i>Khidmah</i> as community identity	<i>Pengajian</i> continues after his death; a sustained spiritual and social legacy	<i>Khidmah</i> becomes institutionalized as a shared identity, not merely a personal trait

Field data ultimately show that social service constituted the core of Gus Lik's religious practice. All informants—students, family members, small-scale vendors, and community leaders—described his social engagement as direct, spontaneous, and consistent. His activities ranged from assisting the poor, accompanying sick neighbors, and distributing food, to mobilizing *santri* for social work. The *pengajian* he led functioned not only as venues for religious instruction but also as centers of social solidarity that brought together extraordinarily large and socially diverse groups of *jamaah*. His ascetic practices—living simply, remaining unmarried, and refusing monetary gifts—were understood by the community as expressions of total sincerity in service. Even the emotional experiences of the congregants, including moments of collective devotion or charismatic events such as sudden changes in weather, demonstrated that they perceived his presence as a source of tranquility, intimacy, and moral inspiration.

Across these accounts, four overarching patterns emerge regarding Gus Lik's social *khidmah*. First, *khidmah* operated as a Sufi practice in which social service constituted an essential form of worship rather than a peripheral activity. For Gus Lik, closeness to the *wong cilik* represented the most concrete expression of faith and compassion. Second, a participatory community emerged from shared involvement in social practices such as distributing food, undertaking communal labor, and accompanying impoverished residents. Religiosity was embodied collectively through action rather than absorbed solely through sermons. Third, his inclusive solidarity attracted *jamaah* from various social strata—pedicab drivers, street vendors, laborers, informal workers, and residents of remote villages. No social boundaries or hierarchies limited the intimacy between him and his followers. Fourth, these dynamics gave rise to a model of social Sufism that fused spiritual depth with civic engagement, allowing religion to function as a transformative force that addressed contemporary social challenges.

Thus, social *khidmah* was not an auxiliary activity but a central spiritual foundation in Gus Lik's life and in the collective identity of his community. It operated as a mechanism for moral authority, communal cohesion, and the emergence of an inclusive and transformative form of social Sufism. These findings demonstrate that within the tradition of lived Sufism, spirituality can take shape as concrete social praxis that exerts substantial influence on community life.

4. Discussion

This study identifies three interrelated patterns that shape the spiritual and social structure of the community surrounding Gus Lik. First, Sufi asceticism forms the foundation of his religious practice. His extreme simplicity, disciplined self-restraint, refusal of material wealth, and intimate proximity to the *wong cilik* (kelompok masyarakat kecil / lower-income groups) represent more than personal preference; they operate as a moral critique of the commercialization of dakwah and the growing performativity of contemporary religiosity. Second, the dimension of *ta'dzim* (penghormatan mendalam kepada guru / deep reverence for one's teacher) forms a mode of non-institutional charismatic authority that constitutes the source of Gus Lik's spiritual legitimacy. His profound respect for KH Marzuki Dahlan not only preserves the continuity of the Sufi tradition but also creates an emotional bond that unites his students, family members, and the wider community. Third, *khidmah* (pelayanan sosial / social service) emerges as the most distinctive element of his religious practice, in which service to the poor, communal labor, food distribution, and direct involvement in community life give rise to a form of community-based social Sufism—namely, a spirituality grounded in service, social closeness, and horizontal solidarity.

Several factors explain why these three patterns consistently appear in the spiritual and social life of Gus Lik. The internalization of classical Sufi teachings shapes *zuhud* not as withdrawal from the world but as a disciplined effort to preserve spiritual clarity. His deep relationship with his teacher, KH Marzuki Dahlan, configures his moral and spiritual orientation and is transmitted through the practice of *ta'dzim*. From this, his charisma does not arise from formal office but from moral exemplarity and the continuity of Sufi tradition. The social configuration of Kediri—marked by a strong pesantren tradition, a culture of *gotong royong* (kerja bersama / communal cooperation), and deep respect for religious scholars—creates an ecosystem wherein these values flourish. In a context shaped by religious modernization and the rising commercialization of dakwah, figures like Gus Lik offer an alternative: a quiet, populist, and grounded model of religiosity, which helps explain why his *jamaah* (congregation) is remarkably large, heterogeneous, and loyal.

These findings contribute to the broader literature on religion and Indonesian society. Earlier studies on religious leadership (Azra & Hasan, 2002; Mudzhar, 1995) tend to focus on ulama operating within formal institutional structures. In contrast, this study demonstrates that non-institutional spiritual authority can become even more powerful when grounded in asceticism, *ta'dzim*, and social *khidmah*. This broadens current understandings of charismatic religious leadership beyond formal structures. Meanwhile, research on contemporary Islamic spirituality (Hefner, 2000; Wahid, 1984) highlights religion's role in counterbalancing consumerist culture but remains largely conceptual. The present study offers empirical evidence that consistently practiced asceticism can function as a moral critique of the capitalization of religion and the performativity of modern dakwah. Likewise, studies on religion and marginalized groups (Umanilo & Chairul, 2014; Wibisono, 2021) emphasize religion's role in empowering vulnerable communities but rarely integrate the Sufi dimension. This study shows how social Sufism can generate solidarity, spiritual care networks, and even micro-economic ecosystems for the *wong cilik* in Kediri.

Thus, this research presents several elements of novelty. First, it uncovers a non-institutional *kiai* whose massive *jamaah* emerges not from organizational structure but from asceticism and social service. Second, it advances the idea of grounded Sufism (*lived sufism*), in which spiritual practice is inseparable from social action, functioning as a mechanism for community service and empowerment. Third, it offers the concept of charismatic authority grounded in *ta'dzim*—a leadership model seldom discussed in contemporary studies of Indonesian Islam but demonstrably influential in shaping grassroots religious communities.

Historically, the phenomenon of Gus Lik reflects the continuity of Javanese Islamic leadership that integrates Sufism, simplicity, and closeness to ordinary people. This leadership pattern aligns with the characteristics of Javanese Islamic leadership, which emphasizes the integration of Islamic values with Javanese cultural norms such as humility, social harmony, and care for marginalized groups (Supriyanto, 2024; Susanto, 2013). Like earlier generations of Javanese ulama, Gus Lik practiced a form of spiritual leadership not grounded in formal institutions but rooted in moral exemplarity and strong affective bonds, consistent with Ricklefs' (2014, 2023) analysis of the continuity of Javanese Islamic tradition. His ascetic lifestyle, deep proximity to the *wong cilik*, and the model of social *khidmah* he cultivated exemplify what Azzuhri et al. (2024) describe as spiritual leadership grounded in wisdom and exemplarity. Moreover, the warm paternalistic leadership typical of Javanese culture (Selvarajah, Meyer, Roostika, & Sukunesan, 2017) is evident in the way he guided his *jamaah* without social distance, embodying the collective transformational ethos noted in studies of Javanese communal leadership (Mukhlisin, Ghazali, & Djastuti, 2021). Thus, Gus Lik not only continues the classical model of ulama leadership but rearticulates it in a modern context, demonstrating that pesantren traditions and Sufism remain relevant and adaptive amid contemporary social change.

Socially, Gus Lik's religious practice demonstrates that grassroots spirituality can foster strong horizontal solidarity through inclusive *pengajian* networks centered on service. His highly heterogeneous *jamaah*—ranging from pedicab drivers to small vendors, laborers, and informal workers—found a safe space, empathy, and a sense of belonging in the PMR and PMJ communities, forming deep-rooted social cohesion that transcended class and background. This pattern aligns with

the concept of religious social cohesion, which explains how religious practices generate social bonds, moral stability, and communal solidarity (Madonsela, 2017). Gus Lik's presence as a spiritual figure who mingled with the *wong cilik*, distributed food, visited the sick, and rejected social hierarchies reinforces religion's role as a social adhesive that manifests not only through teaching but through embodied action. This finding resonates with studies on the role of religion and community initiatives in strengthening social harmony—where rituals, ethical leadership, and emotional proximity enhance solidarity and integration (Al-Karbi, Al-Salhi, & Al-Karbi, 2025; Thoha, Mayudi, Handriana, Qisom, & Ekowati, 2025). Thus, social Sufism in the style of Gus Lik fosters not only personal spirituality but also produces concrete and sustainable grassroots social cohesion.

Ideologically, Gus Lik's religious practice constitutes a subtle yet firm critique of religious commodification, religious populism, and image-driven forms of dakwah that increasingly shape Islamic discourse in Indonesia. In a context where religion is often marketed as a commodity—through the monetization of religious symbols, the creation of “spiritual products,” and the staging of rituals in entertainment formats (Darmawan, 2014), as well as the use of piety as a political communication strategy by public figures (Karman, 2021)—Gus Lik's *zuhud*, extreme simplicity, and refusal of dakwah envelopes, VIP facilities, or grand stages present a powerful counter-narrative. At a time when religious practices in various countries experience materialization and commercialization through digital media—such as amulets and auspicious symbols marketed as religious commodities (Skulsuthavong, 2025)—Gus Lik affirms that religion is service rather than spectacle; spirituality is social work rather than public performance; and the ulama is a servant of the people rather than a celebrity. In this way, his asceticism and *ta'dzim* function not only as personal discipline but as moral resistance to the market logic permeating Islamic spirituality (Benyah, 2023; Putra, Rofiki, Yudha, Riyadi, & Fadilla, 2025), offering an alternative model of religiosity that rejects the reduction of religion into a commercial commodity.

In addition, the findings of this study offer several important contributions to the understanding of religious leadership dynamics and lived religious practices in Indonesia. The leadership model embodied by Gus Lik demonstrates that personal exemplarity, simplicity of life, and social service can form a strong foundation of religious authority independent of formal institutional structures. The form of Sufism he practiced does not remain at the contemplative level; rather, it produces tangible social transformation through a consistent orientation toward marginalized groups. His presence also serves as an alternative narrative to the rise of popular dakwah trends that often become performative, market-oriented, and saturated with visual symbolism. Moreover, the tradition of *ta'dzim* (penghormatan mendalam kepada guru / deep reverence for one's teacher) and the emotional closeness between teacher and student have proven capable of forming a spiritual community that is cohesive, loyal, and resilient. These values highlight how spirituality can function as a source of social energy that strengthens grassroots networks of solidarity.

However, the findings also reveal several dysfunctions that require attention to ensure the long-term sustainability of the community. The community's high dependence on a charismatic figure risks weakening institutional autonomy upon the death of the *kiai*. This dynamic became visible in the profound sense of loss felt by the community following the passing of Gus Lik. From a Weberian perspective, this condition reflects a classical challenge in the routinization of charisma, in which personal authority becomes difficult to transfer into stable organizational structures (Bora, 2020). Extreme ascetic practices—such as lifelong celibacy and the rejection of material possessions—are also difficult for younger generations to emulate, placing the sustainability of this model of piety at risk. Furthermore, the spontaneous and non-institutional nature of *khidmah sosial* (pelayanan sosial / social service) means that social efforts remain dependent on personal initiative rather than systematic organization—a pattern commonly found in communities that have not yet succeeded in formalizing the values of their founders (Schoon & West, 2017). The strength of non-institutional charisma also carries the risk of co-optation or mythologization by various actors after the central figure has passed away, a phenomenon widely observed in post-charismatic religious and political communities (Boulay, 2024). Such dynamics may shift the spiritual legacy into political, economic, or symbolic commodities

that contradict the teachings and moral integrity of the *kiai*. Reflecting on these dysfunctions is essential to ensure that Gus Lik's spiritual legacy does not remain merely a collective memory but becomes a model of social service that is adaptive, structured, and sustainable.

Based on these identified dysfunctions, this study proposes three directions for action designed to ensure the sustainability of Gus Lik's model of social Sufism while minimizing post-charismatic structural risks. First, to address the community's dependence on a single charismatic figure, the institutionalization of *khidmah sosial* is necessary so that social service does not cease with the passing of the *kiai*. This step may involve establishing social service units, trained volunteer groups, or *koperasi jamaah* (cooperative associations run by *jamaah* members) with collective leadership structures. Such mechanisms aim to transform *khidmah*—previously dependent on personal initiative—into an organized, accountable system protected from the risks of co-optation or mythologization commonly found in post-charismatic communities.

Second, to respond to the difficulty of replicating extreme asceticism—such as lifelong celibacy or rejecting material gifts—the core values must be reproduced through substantive education rather than literal imitation. The community may develop non-formal curricula such as classes on social ethics, *halaqah khidmah* (halaqah pelayanan sosial / study circles on social service), or workshops on spirituality that emphasize the essence of values such as simplicity, sincerity, and solidarity with the *wong cilik* (kelompok masyarakat kecil / lower-income groups). Through this approach, younger generations can inherit the spirit of Gus Lik's Sufism without being required to reproduce practices that are unrealistic within modern social contexts.

Third, to mitigate the risks of fragmentation and co-optation after the central figure's death, the community needs to be strengthened as a social agent with collective capacity and clear internal structures. This strengthening can be achieved through the formation of *musyawarah jamaah* (forum musyawarah jamaah / community deliberation forums), community-based humanitarian service networks, or cooperative solidarity-based economic institutions that operate independently and professionally. Such robust and inclusive structures function as healthy mechanisms of routinization of charisma, ensuring that Gus Lik's legacy does not devolve into symbolic commodities or political instruments but remains a sustainable and transformative social movement devoted to the spiritual values he embodied.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the religious practices of Gus Lik represent a form of *lived Sufism* grounded in three interrelated pillars: *asketisme sufistik* (spiritual asceticism), *ta'dzim kepada guru* (deep reverence for one's teacher), and community-based *khidmah sosial* (social service). These three pillars do not operate separately; rather, they complement one another and shape a model of people-centered spirituality deeply rooted in the social fabric of Kediri. The asceticism practiced by Gus Lik functions as a moral critique of the commodification of religion and revitalizes values of simplicity as the ethical foundation of religious life. *Ta'dzim* produces a form of non-institutional charismatic authority that strengthens community cohesion and loyalty. Meanwhile, *khidmah sosial* generates a model of social Sufism that integrates spirituality with concrete acts of service, enabling his *pengajian* communities to develop into spaces of solidarity across social classes.

From a scholarly perspective, this study contributes significantly to research on Indonesian Sufism and religious leadership. First, it introduces the case of a non-institutional *kiai* with a large following despite the absence of formal organizational structures, thereby expanding the understanding of the diversity of religious authority in Indonesia. Second, it proposes the concept of community-based social Sufism, a spirituality not only oriented toward ritual practice but also capable of fostering social solidarity, generating micro-economic support, and forming networks of spiritual care at the grassroots level. Third, it enriches the literature on *lived religion* by demonstrating how *asketisme* and *ta'dzim* can function as mechanisms for shaping collective identity and inclusive participatory religiosity. Fourth, it contributes to discussions on the routinization of charisma in contemporary Indonesian Islam, especially in communities led by non-tarekat and non-institutional figures.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single figure and a single community; therefore, its findings cannot be broadly generalized to all forms of Sufism or all models of *kiai* leadership in Indonesia. Second, the limited duration of fieldwork restricts the ability to conduct long-term observation of the community's post-charismatic dynamics following the death of Gus Lik. Third, the study emphasizes the internal narratives of the community, leaving room for future comparative research with other religious communities that practice similar forms of *asketisme*, *ta'dzim*, or *khidmah*. For these reasons, further research is needed to explore how value institutionalization, the routinization of charisma, and the transformation of social Sufism unfold over time—especially in the face of modernity, religious mediatization, and evolving social structures.

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