

The Epistemology of *Ṭarīqa*: Reframing Sufi Orders as Systems of Spiritual Education

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji fondasi epistemologis tarekat (sufi order) dengan merekonstruksi perannya sebagai sistem pendidikan spiritual dalam kerangka pedagogi Islam yang lebih luas. Dalam wacana akademik modern, tarekat sering kali direduksi menjadi praktik ritual atau institusi sosial-keagamaan semata. Berbeda dengan itu, penelitian ini berargumen bahwa tarekat merupakan sebuah sistem epistemologi yang terstruktur, yang mengintegrasikan wahyu, pengalaman spiritual, dan bimbingan otoritatif. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan serta analisis konseptual dan epistemologis, penelitian ini menelaah sumber-sumber klasik dan kontemporer guna mengidentifikasi komponen utama produksi, transmisi, dan validasi pengetahuan dalam tarekat. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa epistemologi tarekat tersusun atas tiga elemen yang saling terkait, yaitu sumber pengetahuan bersifat tekstual, pengalaman, dan otoritatif, metode perolehan pengetahuan berbasis praktik dan pengalaman dari ritual tarekat, serta mekanisme validasi (otoritas spiritual dan kesinambungan sanad). Proses pembelajaran dalam tarekat bersifat transformasional, dengan menekankan internalisasi nilai-nilai spiritual melalui praktik disiplin seperti baiat, zikir, riyāḍah, mujāhadah, dan suluk di bawah bimbingan seorang mursyid. Proses ini mencerminkan model pendidikan yang holistik, karena mengintegrasikan dimensi kognitif, afektif, dan spiritual dalam rangka membentuk kesadaran dan karakter individu. Dengan demikian, penelitian ini menghadirkan kerangka konseptual baru dalam memahami tarekat sebagai sistem pendidikan tasawuf transformative yang memiliki implikasi signifikan bagi pengembangan pedagogi Islam kontemporer.

Kata kunci: Epistemologi Tarekat; Pendidikan Holistik; Pendidikan Spiritual; Pendidikan Tasawuf.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the epistemological foundations of *ṭarīqa* (Sufi orders) by reconstructing their role as systems of spiritual education within the broader framework of Islamic pedagogy. In modern academic discourse, *tarekat* are often reduced to mere ritual practices or socio-religious institutions. In contrast, this study argues that *tarekat* constitute a structured epistemological system that integrates revelation, spiritual experience, and authoritative guidance. Employing a qualitative approach based on library research, alongside conceptual and epistemological analysis, this study investigates both classical and contemporary sources to identify the key components of knowledge production, transmission, and validation within *ṭarīqa*. The findings reveal that the epistemology of *tarekat* consists of three interrelated elements: (1) sources of

knowledge that are textual, experiential, and authoritative; (2) methods of knowledge acquisition grounded in practice and experiential engagement through *ṭarīqa* rituals; and (3) mechanisms of validation based on spiritual authority and the continuity of *sanad*. The learning process within *ṭarīqa* is inherently transformative, emphasizing the internalization of spiritual values through disciplined practices such as *bay'ah*, *dhikr*, *riyāḍah*, *mujāhadah*, and *sulūk* under the guidance of a *murshid*. This process reflects a holistic educational model that integrates cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions in shaping individual consciousness and character. Accordingly, this study offers a new conceptual framework for understanding *tarekat* as a transformative system of Sufi education, with significant implications for the development of contemporary Islamic pedagogy.

Keywords: Epistemology of *ṭarīqa*; Holistic Education; Spiritual Education; Sufi Education.

Introduction

Sufism in the Islamic tradition constitutes the esoteric dimension in shaping human religious, moral, and spiritual consciousness. From the classical to the contemporary period, Sufism has not merely been understood as an individual spiritual practice, but also as an educational system that guides individuals in the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) in order to attain closeness to God (Bruinessen, 2012; Wahyudi, Srimulyani, et al., 2025). Within this context, *ṭarīqa* (Sufi orders) have developed as institutions of spiritual education characterized by structured learning systems, methods of inner discipline, and pedagogical relationships between the spiritual guide (*murshid*) and the disciple (Aceh, 1985; Solikhin, 2020). As a spiritual path, *ṭarīqa* provide an educational space that emphasizes processes of self-transformation through the internalization of Sufi values, self-regulation, and the cultivation of religious character. Thus, both historically and conceptually, *ṭarīqa* can be understood as a form of Sufi education that integrates knowledge, lived experience, and spiritual formation within a coherent and sustainable system.

However, within the development of modern academic discourse, Sufi orders are often perceived in a limited manner—as merely ritual practices, mystical traditions, or culturally embedded religious organizations (Irfaan, 2018; Nur, 2023). Such perspectives tend to position the *ṭarīqa* solely within the framework of social or religious phenomena, thereby overlooking its epistemological and pedagogical dimensions. In fact, in practice, *ṭarīqa* embody a distinctive system of knowledge, encompassing sources of knowledge, modes of learning, structures of scholarly authority, and mechanisms for validating spiritual experience. Knowledge within the *ṭarīqa* is not acquired exclusively through textual study or rational inquiry, but also through spiritual experience attained via inner discipline, contemplation, and the guidance of a spiritual master (Wahyudi, Srimulyani, et al., 2025). Therefore, understanding the *ṭarīqa* as a system of Sufi education requires an epistemological approach capable of explaining how spiritual knowledge is produced, transmitted, and internalized within the educational process.

On the other hand, the development of modern Islamic education demonstrates an increasing tendency to emphasize cognitive and rational aspects in the learning

process, while the spiritual and transformational dimensions often receive less proportional attention (Nurusya'bani et al., 2026; Suparta, 2017). Formal educational systems tend to prioritize mastery of content and academic achievement, yet they have not fully succeeded in cultivating deep spiritual awareness. This condition creates a gap between normative Islamic education and existential religious experience. In this context, *ṭarīqa* hold significant potential as an educational model that emphasizes the integration of knowledge, lived experience, and the formation of spiritual character.

A number of studies on *ṭarīqa* have predominantly focused on historical aspects (Bruinessen, 1996; Siregar, 2009), rituals, and organizational structures, as well as socio-religious dynamics (Abitolkha & Muvid, 2020). In contrast, studies that position *ṭarīqa* as a system of Sufi education remain relatively limited (Solikhin, 2020). Existing research generally examines *ṭarīqa* from the perspectives of anthropology, sociology of religion, or Islamic history, yet only a few have developed a conceptual framework addressing the epistemology of *ṭarīqa* as a system of spiritual education. This limitation indicates the presence of a scholarly gap, namely the absence of a comprehensive theoretical formulation concerning the epistemological structure of *ṭarīqa* within the framework of Islamic education. In other words, although *ṭarīqa* have long functioned as institutions of spiritual education in Muslim societies, academic understanding of the mechanisms underlying the production and transmission of knowledge within *ṭarīqa* has not yet been systematically developed.

In Islamic epistemology, knowledge is not derived solely from rationality and textual sources, but also from spiritual experience attained through *tazkiyat al-nafs* and *riyāḍah*. This is consistent with the well-known classification of *bayānī*, *burhānī*, and *ʿirfānī*: *bayānī* emphasizes the authority of revealed texts, *burhānī* is grounded in demonstrative rationality, while *ʿirfānī* affirms intuitive knowledge emerging from inner purification (Al-Jabiri, 1990; Khaldūn, 1959). The Sufi tradition acknowledges that spiritual experience constitutes a legitimate source of knowledge, provided that such experience remains aligned with the principles of the Shari'ah and is guided by a spiritually authorized teacher possessing scholarly legitimacy (Al-Ghazālī, n.d.). Within the *ṭarīqa*, the authority of knowledge is determined not only by intellectual capability, but also by spiritual legitimacy transmitted through a chain of scholarly transmission (Al-Haqqani, 1980). Thus, the epistemology of *ṭarīqa* is inherently integrative, combining the dimensions of revelation, spiritual experience, and scholarly authority within a holistic system of education.

The relevance of reconstructing the epistemology of *ṭarīqa* becomes increasingly significant in the context of social change and technological developments that shape how individuals understand religion and engage in spiritual life (Alatas, 2021; Campbell & Tsuria, 2022; Rozehnal, 2023). Globalization and digitalization have transformed patterns of religious interaction, including practices of spiritual learning (Hidayat, 2022; Shadiqin & Jamil, 2024). In this context, education can no longer function merely as a means of

knowledge transfer, but must also be capable of cultivating spiritual awareness and strong moral character. As a long-standing tradition of Sufi education, *ṭarīqa* possess a rich historical experience in shaping individuals who are disciplined, ethically grounded, and spiritually profound. Therefore, reconstructing the epistemology of *ṭarīqa* is essential for articulating the continued relevance of Sufi education in addressing the challenges of modern educational contexts.

The effort to reconstruct the epistemology of *ṭarīqa* in this study aims to position *ṭarīqa* as a system of Sufi education characterized by a clearly defined structure of knowledge, systematic learning methods, and educational objectives oriented toward spiritual and moral transformation. This reconstruction is not intended to alter the essential nature of *ṭarīqa* as a spiritual tradition, but rather to provide a conceptual and academic explanation of how *ṭarīqa* function as an integrative and transformative educational model. Through this approach, *ṭarīqa* can be understood as an educational system that not only transmits knowledge but also transforms spiritual consciousness through a continuous learning process.

This study offers a novel contribution to the development of Sufi studies and Islamic education. First, it shifts the perspective of *ṭarīqa* studies from predominantly phenomenological and sociological approaches toward epistemological and pedagogical frameworks, by positioning *ṭarīqa* as a system of Sufi education with an analyzable structure of knowledge. Second, it proposes a conceptual formulation concerning the integration of three sources of knowledge within *ṭarīqa* —namely revelation, spiritual experience, and the authority of the *murshid*—as the epistemological foundation of Sufi education. Third, it develops a theoretical framework that situates *ṭarīqa* as a model of spiritual education relevant to contemporary Islamic education, particularly in fostering an educational paradigm that emphasizes not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the formation of character and spiritual awareness. The reconstruction of the epistemology of *ṭarīqa* as a form of Sufi education represents an effort to bridge spiritual tradition with scientific approaches in Islamic education. This approach is expected to enrich the academic discourse on Sufi education, while also providing a theoretical contribution to the development of an integrative model of spiritual education that is responsive to the needs of contemporary society.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach based on library research, with an orientation toward conceptual and epistemological analysis (Creswell, 1998).. The primary focus is to reconstruct the epistemology of *ṭarīqa* as a system of Sufi education through a systematic examination of both classical and contemporary literature. Data collection is conducted through documentation and a systematic review of academically credible sources. Data analysis is carried out using content analysis and thematic analysis, aimed at identifying conceptual patterns related to sources of knowledge, learning

methods, and mechanisms of validation within the *ṭarīqa*. The analytical process is conducted iteratively through stages of data reduction, conceptual categorization, and theoretical synthesis in order to produce a systematic and coherent construction of *ṭarīqa* epistemology. Through this approach, the study not only describes the phenomenon but also generates a conceptual formulation that contributes to the development of theories in Sufi education.

Results and Discussion

The Epistemological Structure of *Ṭarīqa* as a System for the Production of Spiritual Knowledge

The findings of this study indicate that *ṭarīqa* cannot be understood merely as ritual institutions or spiritual communities, but rather as an epistemological system characterized by a structured configuration of knowledge. Within the context of Sufi education, *ṭarīqa* function as a space for the production and transmission of spiritual knowledge that integrates theological dimensions, religious experience, and scholarly authority into a unified educational praxis. This perspective is consistent with studies that emphasize *ṭarīqa* as a structured system of spiritual learning, in which the transmission of knowledge occurs not only through texts, but also through practice, inner experience, and the authoritative relationship between *murshid* and disciple within a continuous pedagogical framework (Bruinessen, 2012; Sholikin et al., 2018).

The epistemological structure of *ṭarīqa* can be identified through three main components: sources of knowledge, methods of acquiring knowledge, and mechanisms of knowledge validation. First, the sources of knowledge in *ṭarīqa* are not limited to normative texts such as the Qur'an and Hadith, but also include spiritual experiences attained through disciplined spiritual practices. Spiritual knowledge within *tarekat* is understood as the result of an interaction between revelation, inner experience, and the authoritative guidance of a *murshid*. In this framework, knowledge is not merely cognitive but also transformational, as it involves changes in individual consciousness and character (Chittick, 1989). Moreover, the sources of knowledge in *tarekat*-based education are also understood as immanent, originating from the inner dimension of the individual and actualized through spiritual practices such as *dhikr*, *riyāḍah*, *sulūk*, and *mujāhadah* as taught within the *ṭarīqa* tradition.

Second, the methods of acquiring knowledge within *ṭarīqa* are practical and experience-based. The learning process takes place through sustained spiritual practices such as *dhikr*, *riyāḍah*, and *mujāhadah*. This method indicates that learning in *ṭarīqa* does not rely solely on the transfer of information, but rather on the internalization of spiritual values through direct experience. From a Sufi perspective, knowledge is not merely obtained through cognitive processes, but through repeatedly enacted spiritual experience; practices such as *dhikr* and *riyāḍah* play a crucial role in shaping inner awareness while simultaneously transforming individual character (Al-Ghazālī, n.d.; Arifin

& Rhojachin, 2019; Chittick, 1989). Thus, the epistemology of *ṭarīqa* positions spiritual experience as a central medium in the acquisition of knowledge.

Third, the mechanisms for validating knowledge within *ṭarīqa* are grounded in the principles of spiritual authority and continuity of tradition. Spiritual knowledge is considered valid when it is obtained through guided transmission within a clearly established spiritual lineage (*sanad*). Validation is not measured solely by rational logic, but also by the consistency of spiritual experience and recognition within the spiritual community (Al-Haqqani, 1980). This demonstrates that the epistemology of *ṭarīqa* operates with standards of validation distinct from those of modern scientific epistemology, yet it maintains an internally coherent and systematic logic. It is important to note that spiritual experience within *ṭarīqa* is not automatically regarded as valid knowledge; rather, it must undergo a process of verification by a spiritually authorized authority possessing legitimate standing and an unbroken chain of transmission within the *tarekat* tradition.

Based on the review of the aforementioned literature, this study affirms that *ṭarīqa* can be understood as a system of spiritual education endowed with a distinctive and well-organized epistemological structure. Within this framework, *ṭarīqa* do not merely function as religious institutions oriented toward ritual practice, but also as educational institutions that systematically cultivate spiritual knowledge through learning processes grounded in disciplined spiritual training under the guidance of a *murshid*. It is precisely this spiritual discipline that enables *ṭarīqa* to play a significant role in shaping religious consciousness, moral character, and the spiritual maturity of individuals within a structured community of Sufi learning.

Mechanisms of Learning Transformation in *Ṭarīqa* Education

The review of various scholarly works indicates that learning mechanisms within *ṭarīqa* cannot be reduced to mere processes of knowledge transfer; rather, they constitute a gradual and continuous process of spiritual transformation. In the *ṭarīqa* tradition, learning is directed toward a transformation of consciousness that integrates cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions in a unified manner (Muvid, 2019). In line with this, Chittick (1993) emphasizes that knowledge in Sufism is existential in nature, meaning that it is not only intellectually understood but must also be experienced and embodied in the praxis of life. Learning in *ṭarīqa* is therefore understood as a process of internalizing Sufi values oriented toward the formation of spiritual awareness, such that Islamic practices are not merely performed formally, but are deeply internalized and contribute to the refinement of the dimensions of *al-īmān* and *al-islām* (Arafat & Farhan, 2021).

This transformative mechanism unfolds through a distinctive pedagogical relationship between the *murshid* and the disciple. In this context, the *murshid* functions not only as a formal instructor, but also as a spiritual guide endowed with scholarly

authority and legitimate *sanad*. This relationship is both personal and transformative, wherein the learning process occurs through direct guidance and exemplary conduct. The *murshid* may also be understood as a form of spiritual *panopticon*, fostering a continuous awareness of inner supervision (Shadiqin, 2022). Bruinessen (1996) further explains that, within the *ṭarīqa* tradition, the transmission of knowledge does not occur solely through texts, but primarily through the teacher–disciple relationship, which serves as the central medium for the transmission of authority and spiritual experience. Within this framework, the quality of the pedagogical relationship becomes a decisive factor in determining the effectiveness of the learning process.

The process of transformation within *ṭarīqa* is realized through disciplined and continuous spiritual practices such as *bay'ah*, *dhikr*, *riyāḍah*, *mujāhadah*, *murāqabah*, and *sulūk*. These practices function not merely as ritual activities, but also as experiential learning methods grounded in direct engagement. Such patterns can be observed across various Sufi orders, including the Naqshbandiyya Haqqaniyya, Naqshbandiyya Khalidiyya, and Qadiriyya wa Naqshbandiyya (Nurani, 2020; Salahudin, 2016; Yusuf, 2020). Other scholarly works further indicate that learning within *ṭarīqa* unfolds through relatively systematic stages, beginning with self-awareness, followed by the process of purification of the soul, and culminating in the attainment of spiritual maturity (Schimmel, 1975). This staged structure reflects the presence of an organized pedagogical framework oriented toward long-term development. Consequently, the success of the learning process is not measured solely by cognitive achievement, but by transformations in behavior, the cultivation of spiritual discipline, and the quality of moral character in everyday life.

Reconstruction of *Ṭarīqa* Epistemology as a Model of Sufi Education

The findings indicate that the epistemology of *ṭarīqa* holds significant potential to be reconstructed as a model of Sufi education aligned with the principles of Islamic *sharī'ah*. This reconstruction is not intended to alter the substantive teachings of Sufism, but rather to reorganize its conceptual framework so that it remains rooted in normative religious principles while also responding to contemporary intellectual developments and educational needs. Empirically, however, it cannot be overlooked that certain *ṭarīqa* practices exhibit tendencies that may be considered problematic, including excessive ritualism, uncontrolled claims of spiritual authority, and doctrinal interpretations that risk diverging from established Islamic theological principles (Rahman, 2000).

Nevertheless, such critiques do not necessarily negate the existence of *ṭarīqa* as a legitimate system of spiritual education. In many instances, *ṭarīqa* demonstrate significant contributions to moral cultivation, the strengthening of religious consciousness, and the formation of individual spiritual character (Iqbal & Farid, 2017; Wahyudi et al., 2020). A number of studies also suggest that Sufi practices—such as *dhikr* and spiritual exercises—have positive implications for mental health (Bakri et al., 2025; Nizamie et al., 2020), particularly in fostering inner tranquility (Qomariyyah & Saifuddin, 2022), self-

regulation, and psychological resilience within Muslim communities (Isgandarova, 2019; Wahyudi, Shadiqin, et al., 2025). Within this framework, the reconstruction of *ṭarīqa* epistemology becomes essential for maintaining a balance between the authenticity of Sufi teachings, rational inquiry, and the normative values of the *sharī'ah*, thereby ensuring its continued function as an integrative, critical, and transformative model of education in accordance with the principles of Islamic spirituality.

The reconstruction of *ṭarīqa* epistemology in this study introduces a novel approach by positioning the integration of spiritual (*'irfānī*) and rational (*burhānī*) dimensions as the foundation of Sufi educational processes. Within this framework, spiritual knowledge is no longer treated as an entity opposed to scientific knowledge; rather, it is understood as a complementary source that enriches a holistic comprehension of reality. The originality of this approach lies in its systematic effort to formulate *ṭarīqa* as an epistemological system that is not only grounded in inner experience but also possesses methodological rationality that can be examined within the framework of contemporary Islamic education.

This reconstruction results in a conceptual model of Sufi education that situates spirituality as an integral component of modern Islamic educational systems through the integration of knowledge and spiritual experience. The model does not merely adapt *ṭarīqa* traditions to contemporary contexts, but also transforms them into an educational paradigm responsive to the challenges of modernity. Another significant contribution lies in affirming that *ṭarīqa*-based Sufi education can contribute to the development of knowledge oriented toward humanistic values, sustainability, and the balance between intellectual and spiritual dimensions. In doing so, it expands the scope of Islamic pedagogy from mere knowledge transmission toward the formation of consciousness and civilization.

These findings underscore that the epistemology of *ṭarīqa* holds substantial relevance in contemporary education, particularly in addressing the moral and spiritual crises of modern society. In such conditions, education cannot be confined to cognitive dimensions alone, but must also emphasize character formation and inner awareness. The reconstruction of *ṭarīqa* epistemology as a system of Sufi education thus offers an integrative alternative paradigm, balancing knowledge, moral development, and spiritual cultivation in a holistic Islamic educational process.

Conclusion

This study affirms that *ṭarīqa* function not only as spiritual institutions oriented toward ritual practices, but also as systems of Sufi education characterized by a systematic and operational epistemological structure. The epistemology of *ṭarīqa* demonstrates that the process of spiritual education is constructed through the integration of normative sources of knowledge, spiritual experience, and the authority of spiritual guidance within a religious community. In this sense, *ṭarīqa* can be understood as

a pedagogical space that facilitates the formation of spiritual consciousness and the continuous transformation of individual character. The findings further indicate that learning within ṭarīqa embodies the characteristics of transformative education, oriented toward changes in both consciousness and behavior. The educational process does not merely emphasize the transfer of knowledge, but also the cultivation of spiritual character through sustained practices of inner discipline. This orientation reflects the holistic nature of Sufi education, encompassing cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions simultaneously. Thus, the epistemology of ṭarīqa may be conceptualized as a model of education that emphasizes the balance between knowledge, spiritual experience, and moral formation. The reconstruction of ṭarīqa epistemology as Sufi education represents an effort to develop an educational paradigm that positions spirituality as an integral component of the learning process. Such a paradigm underscores that education should not only aim to produce individuals with intellectual competence, but also those who possess moral maturity and deep spiritual awareness.

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