

The Influence of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa on the Development of Sufi thought in Malaysia

Muhammad Fuad Kamaludin

Université Mohammed V de Rabat

Email: rembawi@gmail.com

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Abstract

The Ahmadiyah Tariqa is one of the Sufi orders that has significantly contributed to the development of Sufi thought in Malaysia. This study examines the historical emergence and development of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa, particularly its influence on intellectual discourse and spiritual practices among Muslims in Malaysia. Employing a qualitative approach through textual analysis and field research, this study analyzes how the teachings and methodologies of this tariqa have shaped the concepts of tazkiyah al-nafs (purification of the soul), ma'rifah (spiritual knowledge), and the guru-disciple relationship within the local Sufi milieu. Additionally, the study assesses the role of institutions and key figures in the dissemination and consolidation of Ahmadiyah teachings in Malaysia. The findings reveal that this tariqa has not only played a role in individual spiritual development but has also contributed to intellectual advancements in Sufism, including debates on the relationship between shari'ah and haqiqah. The implications of this study indicate that the Ahmadiyah Tariqa has significantly influenced the practice of Sufism in Malaysia, both on a personal level and within broader Islamic institutions.

Keywords: Ahmadiyah Tariqa, Sufi thought, Malaysia, Sufism, Spiritual Development, Islamic Institutions.

Introduction

The *Ahmadiyah Tariqa* or *Tariqah Ahmadiyyah Idrisiyyah* was founded by Sayyid Ahmad ibn Idris (1760–1837) in Fes, Morocco, in the early 19th century. This tariqa is renowned as a reformist movement within the realm of Sufism—Ahmad ibn Idris is regarded as an *islah* (reformist) figure due to his restructuring of previous Sufi doctrines that he considered to have deviated from the foundations of the Qur'an and Sunnah (Zarrina, 2001). The emergence of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa revitalized Sufi traditions that had waned due to Western colonial pressures and the confusion surrounding philosophical Sufism at the time (Hamdan, 1990). From Fes, its influence spread across continents to the Malay world, making it one of the three most prominent Sufi orders practiced in Malaysia (al-Attas, 2020).

The arrival of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa in the Malay Peninsula occurred at the end of the 19th century. A Kelantanese scholar, Shaykh Abdul Samad bin Muhammad, better known as *Tuan Tabal* (1840–1891), is recorded as the first *khalifah* of this tariqa in the Malay world (Che Zarrina, 2001). Under his guidance, Kelantan became the initial center for the propagation of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa, with him and his disciples establishing *halaqat* (circles of remembrance) and *suluk* (spiritual retreats) that revived Sufi traditions in the region. Among the earliest local figures involved were Sidi Muhammad al-Azhari and Haji Daud Bukit Abal in Kelantan, who continued the teachings of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa after studying under Meccan scholars who were disciples of Sayyid Ahmad ibn Idris (O’Fahey, 1990). By the early 20th century, the tariqa had also taken root in Negeri Sembilan, brought by Shaykh Muhammad Said bin Jamaluddin al-Linggi (1874–1927) upon his return from Mecca (Sedgwick, 2005). Shaykh Muhammad Said, who later became the Mufti of Negeri Sembilan, played a crucial role in expanding the Ahmadiyah Idrisiyyah Tariqa there, to the extent that Negeri Sembilan became known as a “Sufi-friendly state” (Zarrina, 2002).

Through figures like *Tuan Tabal* in the East Coast and Shaykh Muhammad Said in the Western Peninsula, the teachings of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa were successfully adapted to the local context and influenced mainstream Sufi thought among Malays. This tariqa emphasizes a balance between external and internal knowledge - strengthening *aqidah* (creed) and *shari’ah* while enhancing *ihsan* (spiritual excellence) - thus shaping a moderate Sufi approach firmly grounded in *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah* (Hamdan, 1990). This approach directly impacted local Sufi discourse by refocusing on spiritual values based on the Qur'an and *hadith*, rather than an emphasis on extreme metaphysical concepts.

The administration and influence of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa in Malaysia’s Sufi development raise several significant research questions. The importance of this study lies in the fact that this tariqa has long been entrenched in local Islamic traditions, yet its intellectual influence on Malay Sufi thought has not been extensively studied. Existing literature tends to focus on historical narratives and biographies of Sufi leaders or on the *dhikr* (remembrance) practices and organizational structures of the tariqa, while giving less attention to how its ideas permeate Sufi thought and literary works in Malaysia. Therefore, examining the influence of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa is essential for understanding the intellectual evolution of local Sufi traditions—particularly how the reformism introduced by Ahmad ibn Idris has shaped Malay scholars’ understanding of concepts such as *ma’rifah* (spiritual enlightenment), *tarbiyyah ruhaniyyah* (spiritual education), and the harmonization of *shari’ah* and *tariqa* (Che Zarrina, 2001).

This study is also relevant in addressing gaps in the historiography of Sufism in Malaysia, where dominant narratives often focus on other tariqas such as Naqshbandiyyah or Shadhiliyyah, while the role of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa remains underrepresented in academic discourse (Sedgwick, 2005).

Previous studies on the Ahmadiyah Tariqa can be categorized into two main types: specific studies on this tariqa and comparative studies with other tariqas. Hamdan Hassan (1990) produced one of the earliest comprehensive works, *Tarekat Ahmadiyyah di Malaysia: Suatu Analisis Fakta secara Ilmiah*, which compiled historical facts and profiles of figures associated with the tariqa in Malaysia. Che Zarrina Sa’ari (2001, 2002) also contributed important studies

on the development of the tariqa in Kelantan and Negeri Sembilan. On a global scale, the research of R. S. O’Fahey (1990) and Sedgwick (2005) provides an extensive background on the history and influence of the tariqa in the Middle East and Africa.

There are also comparative studies with other tariqas such as Naqshbandiyyah and Qadiriyyah (Azra, 2004). These studies indicate that the Ahmadiyah Tariqa differs from other tariqas due to its reformist nature, emphasizing renewal in Sufism while remaining aligned with *shari’ah* (Che Zarrina, 2001). Consequently, this study aims to fill the gap in academic discourse regarding the influence of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa on the development of Sufi thought in Malaysia.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative approach, aligning with the nature of qualitative research that emphasizes the interpretation of meaning derived from data and phenomena under examination (Creswell, 2014). This approach is based on textual analysis and literature review, wherein written sources concerning the Ahmadiyah Tariqa are analyzed in depth.

The data for this study is obtained entirely from secondary sources consisting of academic literature (Neuman, 2011). As is customary in research on Sufi tariqas, data collection is conducted through a literature review and document analysis, which involves examining existing scholarly materials (Bowen, 2009). These sources include peer-reviewed academic journals, scholarly books, conference papers, master's and doctoral theses, and previous research reports related to the Ahmadiyah Tariqa and Sufi thought in Malaysia (Flick, 2018).

A systematic documentation process is employed to record key information from each examined source (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). This literature-based approach is consistent with qualitative research methodology, which relies on existing data as the primary basis for analysis (Flick, 2018). The collected data is analyzed using content analysis, a method used to identify key themes, patterns of thought, and core issues that emerge within texts related to the Ahmadiyah Tariqa (Krippendorff, 2013). Content analysis enables textual data to be systematically deconstructed and categorized, making it a widely utilized method in qualitative research on Islamic studies.

Analysis and Discussion

The Implications of Sufi Thought Among Malaysian Society Due to the Influence of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa

The influence of the Ahmadiyah Idrisiyyah Tariqa on the spiritual thought of Malaysian society is evident in shaping religious attitudes that emphasize the search for inner meaning and zikrullah (remembrance of God). This Sufi order, which stresses the purification of the soul under the guidance of a murshid (spiritual master), has been deeply rooted in specific communities such as those in Negeri Sembilan and Kelantan since the mid-19th century (Badaruddin et al., 2021; Sa’ari, 2001). Through the continuous practice of zikr and wird (daily litanies), its followers cultivate the concept of ihsan—experiencing God's presence in daily life—thus shaping societal thought towards greater spirituality and humility (Abdul Ghani & Nik Yusri, 2024).

For example, the practice of congregational zikr after prayers, once prevalent in mosques and surau (small prayer halls) in Kelantan, reflects the influence of Sufi practices in local culture. Beyond enriching personal spiritual experiences, the Ahmadiyah Tariqa has also impacted religious institutions and Islamic education in Malaysia. In Negeri Sembilan, this tariqa flourished due to the missionary efforts of Shaykh Muhammad Said al-Linggi (Wan Zailani, 2022), and Negeri Sembilan has since been recognized as the main center of the Ahmadiyah Idrisiyyah Tariqa, maintaining its strong influence even after nearly two centuries. Today, its presence is more prominent through structured institutions such as Yayasan Sofa Negeri Sembilan and Pertubuhan Tarekat al-Muhammadiyah (Ibrahim, 2021).

This influence also extends to traditional Islamic institutions (pondok schools), where curricula are imbued with Sufi elements, producing Islamic scholars who appreciate spiritual dimensions alongside the outward aspects of shari'ah. From a religious cultural perspective, the Ahmadiyah Tariqa has introduced elements such as mawlid (celebrations of the Prophet's birth), qasidah (spiritual poetry), and the custom of venerating shaykhs, all of which have become integral to Malaysia's religious landscape (Nasr, 2007). However, this influence has also generated debate regarding the boundaries of Sufi practices. Certain traditions, perceived as "foreign" by mainstream society, have sparked discussions between Sufi proponents and religious authorities. Overall, the Ahmadiyah Tariqa has profoundly shaped society by fostering a focus on spirituality and ethics, while mainstream religious institutions strive to ensure that its teachings remain aligned with shari'ah principles.

Comparison of Sufi Thought in the Ahmadiyah Tariqa and Other Dominant Tariqas in Malaysia
In Malaysia, several established Sufi orders, such as the Naqshbandiyyah and Qadiriyyah, also contribute to the development of Sufism. These three tariqas share a common goal—drawing closer to God through suluk (spiritual retreats) and zikr—but the Ahmadiyah Tariqa possesses distinctive features that set it apart.

From a historical perspective, the Ahmadiyah Tariqa (founded in the early 19th century) emerged as a reformist movement within Sufism, also known as Tariqah Muhammadiyyah, emphasizing a return to the Qur'an and Sunnah while rejecting excessive reliance on taqlid (uncritical imitation of religious authorities) (Badaruddin et al., 2021). This reformist approach differs from the Naqshbandiyyah (founded in the 14th century) and the Qadiriyyah (12th century), which generally maintain traditional Sufi practices without a strong emphasis on doctrinal renewal.

For instance, Ahmad ibn Idris, the founder of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa, did not appoint a specific successor or establish a formal organizational structure, instead emphasizing that the ultimate spiritual guide for all Sufis is the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself (Badaruddin et al., 2021). This contrasts with the Naqshbandiyyah and Qadiriyyah, which place great importance on clear lineages of human spiritual masters in their hierarchical structures.

In terms of spiritual practices, the Ahmadiyah Tariqa integrates various elements due to Ahmad ibn Idris's extensive background in multiple Sufi orders—he had received ijazah (spiritual authorization) from the Shadhiliyyah, Khalwatiyyah, and other orders before establishing his own path (Sedgwick, 2005). Consequently, the Ahmadiyah zikr practice is not confined to a single method: it incorporates loud remembrance (zikr jahr) like the Qadiriyyah, as well as

silent remembrance (zikr khafi) and spiritual contemplation (muraqabah) similar to Naqshbandi traditions. This flexibility is one of the unique traits of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa.

From a theological standpoint, the Ahmadiyah Tariqa leans toward a more “Salafi” approach—Ahmad ibn Idris was known for his strict adherence to tawhid (Islamic monotheism) and his rejection of extreme metaphysical speculations (Muhammad Syahmi & Syed Mohammad Hilmi, 2024). For example, he opposed the excessive veneration of Sufi masters and rejected the doctrine of wahdat al-wujud (unity of existence), which was influential in certain Naqshbandi circles through Persian and Indian traditions. In contrast, Qadiriyyah practices in the Malay world sometimes incorporate elements of the "Martabat Tujuh" (Seven Grades of Being) cosmology, although this varies among different Sufi teachers.

Criticism of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa from the Perspective of Modern Scholars

In the modern era, Sufi orders, including the Ahmadiyah Tariqa, have not escaped critical scrutiny from scholars and Islamic reformists. The reformist (tajdid) movement and contemporary scholars often question certain aspects of Sufi practices that are perceived as diverging from the essence of pure Islamic teachings. One of the main criticisms is that some followers of tariqas become excessively attached to rituals and their spiritual masters (shaykhs), to the extent that they neglect fundamental obligations of shari’ah (Fahrudin et al., 2024).

Critics argue that Sufism, as practiced in some tariqas, has incorporated foreign elements that lack solid foundations in the Qur’an and hadith (Fahrudin et al., 2024). For instance, certain specific practices, such as talqin zikr (the initiation of zikr by a shaykh) and prescribed daily litanies (wird) unique to the Ahmadiyah Tariqa, have been questioned regarding their authenticity—whether they are truly rooted in a prophetic tradition or later innovations.

Salafi-oriented scholars, in particular, reject practices that lack explicit textual evidence, thus challenging collective and structured zikr practices in Sufi orders as having no basis in shari’ah (Fahrudin et al., 2024). Additionally, the concept of ma’rifah (direct knowledge of God) has raised concerns over potential misinterpretations. Modern critics caution that claims of receiving "direct knowledge from God" might lead to the dismissal of exoteric Islamic knowledge and shari’ah obligations, as has happened with some extreme Sufi figures throughout history.

Furthermore, the concept of wahdat al-wujud (unity of existence), often associated with philosophical Sufism, is strongly rejected by reformists, who argue that it bears resemblance to pantheism and polytheism—although this interpretation is not necessarily what Sufi scholars intend (Fahrudin et al., 2024).

In Malaysia, since the early 20th century, reformist scholars from the Kaum Muda movement, such as Shaykh Tahir Jalaluddin and Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, have criticized tariqa practices they deemed superstitious or detrimental to the intellectual progress of Muslims (Fahrudin et al., 2024; Yusoff et al., 2024). They argued that an excessive focus on mystical experiences could hinder the intellectual and material advancement of the Muslim community.

The methodology of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa has also been scrutinized; for example, the practice of spiritual retreat (uzlah or khalwah) among some disciples has been criticized for being counterproductive if taken to extremes.

However, scholars from within the Ahmadiyah Tariqa have responded to these criticisms. They argue that Sufi teachings, when properly understood, align with the principles of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (Sunni orthodoxy) and do not deviate from Islam. Tariqa followers emphasize that their murshids constantly remind adherents of the importance of prayer, fasting, and shari'ah obligations—with the tariqa merely serving as a means of training the soul to develop greater devotion in practicing shari'ah.

Moreover, historical records show that Ahmad ibn Idris, the founder of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa, was himself a reformist. He critiqued excessive attachment to spiritual masters and re-emphasized the Qur'an and Sunnah as the foundation of spiritual practice (Badaruddin et al., 2021; Muhammad Syahmi & Syed Mohammad Hilmi, 2024). This internal evidence suggests that the Ahmadiyah Tariqa has been self-aware of potential deviations and has proactively corrected them since its inception.

Regarding the concept of ma'rifah, Ahmadiyah scholars clarify that it refers to profound understanding granted by God to devoted seekers—not as a new form of divine revelation that rivals the Qur'an, but rather as wisdom that strengthens adherence to shari'ah. The mystical aspects of Sufism, such as spiritual experiences, must be guided by qualified teachers to prevent misinterpretations (Yusoff et al., 2024).

In response to the accusation that Sufism promotes passivity, with some believing that sustenance (rizq) will come effortlessly through the blessings of zikr, Ahmadiyah leaders emphasize the balance between outward effort (asbab) and supplication (du'a').

In contemporary academic discourse, pro-Sufi scholars have defended Sufi orders by highlighting that proper Sufi education produces Muslims who are both moderate and committed to shari'ah, thereby challenging the negative narrative that all Sufi orders are backward or deviant (Fahrudin et al., 2024).

Overall, the engagement between critics and supporters of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa fosters continuous dialogue and reform—for example, the tariqa has become more transparent in providing textual justifications for its practices, and certain unsubstantiated traditions have been abandoned. This demonstrates the tariqa's capacity for self-renewal (tajdid) from within.

Challenges and Relevance of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa in the Modern World (Context of Contemporary Islam in Malaysia)

The modern world presents unique challenges to the continuity of Sufi orders such as Ahmadiyah. The processes of urbanization, the influence of secularism, and the development of information technology necessitate that the order adapts to remain relevant. One of the biggest challenges is the perception among modern society that Sufi orders are “traditional” or incompatible with contemporary life. For instance, younger generations educated in secular institutions may view practices such as uzlah (seclusion) or prolonged zikir

(remembrance of God) gatherings as unproductive. Additionally, statistics indicate a decline in support in several regions—for example, in Kelantan, only the Ahmadiyah Tariqa remains from among the various Sufi orders that existed in the early 20th century, and even so, with a decreasing number of followers (Yusoff et al., 2024).

This phenomenon has compelled the Ahmadiyah Tariqa to adjust its proselytization strategies. Today, order leaders employ a more open approach: they establish formal institutions such as educational centers or registered zawiyah (spiritual lodges) to attract participation from professionals. In Negeri Sembilan, for instance, the Ahmadiyah Tariqa's legacy has been institutionalized through collaboration with state religious authorities. This has made the Ahmadiyah teachings more easily accepted by mainstream society.

The close relationship between this order and government religious institutions helps address bureaucratic challenges: the order's curriculum is reviewed to ensure alignment with the guidelines of the Mufti Department, while their spiritual programs are frequently conducted with official permission.

In the context of the challenges posed by secularism, the Ahmadiyah Tariqa provides a counter-narrative to materialistic lifestyles. Many people experience a spiritual void in the fast-paced modern world, and the order serves as an alternative means to fill this existential emptiness. Through disciplines such as daily zikir, scholarly gatherings, and moral guidance, the order assists individuals in finding inner peace without completely isolating themselves from the modern world. Moreover, contemporary trends show a growing interest in “Islamic spirituality” among young professionals who seek a balanced life. The Ahmadiyah Tariqa, with its emphasis on moderate Sunni Sufism, has the potential to meet this demand—provided that it can present its teachings in a language that resonates with the present generation.

Efforts such as the publication of academic works on the order (Muhammad Syahmi & Syed Mohammad Hilmi, 2024), Sufism seminars involving university scholars, and the use of social media for da'wah (proselytization) all contribute to enhancing the profile of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa in contemporary discourse.

From a bureaucratic perspective, the challenges faced include the need for official recognition. In Malaysia, only muktabar (recognized) Sufi orders are allowed to operate publicly. The Ahmadiyah Tariqa is generally recognized in most states due to its long history and teachings that do not contradict Islamic creed. However, they must remain vigilant, as any complaints regarding deviations could lead to investigations by religious authorities.

Past experiences with Sufi-influenced movements, such as Al-Arqam—which was banned—have led recognized orders to be more cautious to avoid being perceived as cult-like or deviant. Therefore, the leadership of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa often emphasizes openness: they encourage followers to remain engaged with the broader community, attend prayers in public mosques, and not neglect family or career responsibilities. This approach is essential in dispelling negative stereotypes that Sufi orders promote anti-social or regressive lifestyles.

On a global scale, the Ahmadiyah Tariqa also leverages international networks to remain relevant. The descendants of Ahmad ibn Idris from Sudan, who currently lead the order, inject

new ideas and spiritual energy into the branches in Malaysia (Badaruddin et al., 2021). Cross-border murshid-disciple relationships—such as visits by *syuyukh* (spiritual masters) from the Middle East or Africa—not only strengthen the legitimacy of the order in the eyes of its followers but also ensure that its teachings remain dynamic through exchanges of wisdom from scholars across different regions.

After nearly two centuries, the Ahmadiyah Tariqa in Malaysia continues to survive through these international networks, demonstrating its resilience and adaptability to changing times (Badaruddin et al., 2021). Furthermore, the order's relevance in the modern era is evident in its contributions to addressing contemporary issues such as moral decay and mental health challenges. Many of the order's spiritual programs now emphasize spiritual well-being as a component of social rehabilitation—for example, aiding in the treatment of drug addiction or stress through *zikir* therapy and Islamic counseling.

This situates the order not merely as a closed circle of *zikir* practitioners but as a strategic partner in human development in the modern era. In summary, the challenges of secularism, bureaucracy, and societal perceptions have pushed the Ahmadiyah Tariqa to innovate in its approach, yet its core teachings on the pursuit of Divine presence remain relevant. As long as the order remains committed to balancing the authenticity of its spiritual practices with contemporary realities, it will continue to be a significant component in Islamic Sufi thought in Malaysia.

Conclusion

Overall, the position of the Ahmadiyah Tariqa within Malaysian Sufi thought is both significant and unique. This study finds that the order not only inherits a spiritual tradition that deepens the religious experience of society but also emerges as a reformist agent within the Sufi framework of the Nusantara region. Its influence has shaped the mindset of a segment of Malaysian Muslims, emphasizing the esoteric dimension of faith without neglecting *shari'ah*—an achievement that successfully balances the dual dimensions of religion. Compared to other major orders such as the Naqshbandi and Qadiri, the Ahmadiyah Tariqa presents a distinctive Sufi intellectual approach—one that harmonizes the legacy of Sufism with a reaffirmation of the Qur'an and Sunnah. This very element renders the Ahmadiyah Tariqa exceptional and resilient; it is capable of responding to criticism by referring to its inherently moderate and scripturally grounded principles. Despite facing the challenges of modern scholarly critiques that at times label Sufi practices as outdated or deviant, the Ahmadiyah Tariqa has demonstrated both intellectual and spiritual adaptability. Its scholars have successfully defended the practices of Sufism through academic argumentation and empirical justification, proving that its teachings align with mainstream Sunni Sufism.

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