



# Reactualizing Classical Islamic Spirituality: An Ethnographic Study of the Transformative Impact of Ihya Ulumuddin Study Circles on Holistic Quality of Life

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## Abstract

This study aims to examine the transformative impact of collective study circles of Ihya Ulumuddin by Imam Al-Ghazali on participants' holistic quality of life. Employing a qualitative design with an ethnographic approach, the research was conducted among congregants attending a weekly Tuesday-night recitation in Ganjaran Village, Gondanglegi, Malang. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, and were analyzed thematically to capture lived experiences and patterns of meaning-making within the study circle. The findings reveal that sustained engagement with Ihya Ulumuddin fosters comprehensive personal development, encompassing intellectual enrichment and processes of spiritual self-purification (tazkiyat al-nafs). Participants demonstrate enhanced reflective thinking, disciplined worship practices, ethical refinement, and strengthened social responsibility. The text functions not merely as a doctrinal reference but as a practical framework integrating inner and outer dimensions of life, harmonizing individual and communal orientations, and bridging knowledge ('ilm) with embodied practice ('amal). Consequently, regular participation contributes to measurable improvements in spiritual, psychological, moral, and social well-being.

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## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary societies are increasingly confronted with moral fragmentation, spiritual alienation, and psychological vulnerability amid rapid modernization and technological acceleration (Hidayat, 2026; Issn & Xakimov, 2025). The erosion of shared ethical frameworks has weakened communal bonds and intensified individual anxieties, making the search for meaningful spiritual resources more urgent than ever. Numerous global reports on mental health and social distrust indicate rising levels of stress, loneliness, and ethical relativism, suggesting that material progress alone

cannot secure human flourishing (Abdurrahman, 2026; Husni, 2026; Muhammad & Barizi, 2026). Within Muslim communities, classical Islamic scholarship offers a reservoir of spiritual and moral guidance capable of addressing these crises (Khanzada Muhammad Waqar, Safia Khan, 2024; Sahin, 2019). The enduring relevance of *Ihya Ulumuddin* by Imam Al-Ghazali lies in its integrative vision of knowledge, ethics, and spirituality. Therefore, examining how this classical text is reactualized in lived communal settings is crucial for understanding its potential contribution to holistic quality of life in contemporary contexts.

Despite the richness of Islamic intellectual heritage, many contemporary religious engagements remain fragmented, emphasizing ritual performance without fostering deep ethical transformation or intellectual reflection (Douglas & State, 2024; Pratama, 2026). Religious learning is often reduced to doctrinal transmission, detached from the existential struggles of modern believers (Tahom & Srisophon, 2025). This disconnection generates a gap between knowledge (*'ilm*) and practice (*'amal*), limiting religion's transformative capacity. In rural and urban Muslim communities alike, individuals may attend religious gatherings regularly, yet measurable changes in moral conduct, psychological resilience, and social responsibility are not always evident. The broader problem, therefore, concerns how classical spiritual teachings can be internalized in ways that genuinely shape personal character and communal well-being. Without empirical investigation into lived experiences of religious study, claims about spiritual transformation remain normative rather than analytical. Addressing this problem is essential to demonstrate whether traditional Islamic texts can meaningfully respond to contemporary crises of meaning and ethical orientation.

In Ganjaran Village, Gondanglegi, Malang, a weekly Tuesday-night study circle dedicated to *Ihya Ulumuddin* has developed into a sustained communal practice attracting participants from diverse educational and occupational backgrounds. Observationally, the gathering extends beyond textual exposition; it includes reflective dialogue, collective supplication, and informal social support among congregants. Participants frequently articulate experiences of increased self-discipline, emotional regulation, and strengthened communal solidarity. The study

circle operates not merely as a pedagogical forum but as a moral community in which ethical norms are rehearsed and embodied. Such phenomena suggest that the text functions as a catalyst for both intellectual engagement and spiritual self-purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*). However, these observable transformations require systematic ethnographic analysis to understand how meanings are constructed, negotiated, and internalized within everyday life. The local practice thus provides a compelling empirical site for examining the lived impact of classical Islamic spirituality.

Previous scholarship on Al-Ghazalian thought has predominantly focused on theological doctrines, epistemology, and Sufi metaphysics, highlighting the conceptual integration of law, ethics, and mysticism. Studies in Islamic philosophy and spirituality have underscored Al-Ghazali's role in reconciling rational inquiry with experiential knowledge (Al-ghazali & Through, 2025; Discourses, 2025), portraying *Ihya Ulumuddin* as a comprehensive manual of moral reform. Meanwhile, research in anthropology of religion has examined study circles (*halaqah*) as sites of identity formation and communal reproduction of religious authority (Chaplin, 2018; Issues & Service, 2025). Although these works illuminate textual significance and social function, they often treat classical texts either as historical artifacts or as abstract normative frameworks. Limited attention has been given to how sustained communal engagement with a single classical text shapes participants' holistic quality of life in measurable and experiential terms (Dias et al., 2019; Hosseini, 2023). Consequently, the transformative dimensions of regular textual study remain underexplored within contemporary lived contexts.

Empirical studies addressing spirituality and well-being within Muslim societies frequently employ survey-based methodologies, emphasizing psychological variables such as life satisfaction or coping mechanisms. While valuable, these approaches tend to isolate spirituality from its pedagogical and communal dimensions. Conversely, ethnographic investigations of religious gatherings often privilege ritual performance or political identity (Rosati, 2009), overlooking processes of intellectual cultivation and moral self discipline embedded in textual study. The intersection between classical Sufi pedagogy, communal learning practices, and holistic well-being thus remains insufficiently theorized (Khan, 2025). There is a need

for in-depth qualitative research that captures participants' lived narratives, interpretive processes, and embodied transformations. By situating Ihya Ulumuddin within a contemporary rural Indonesian setting, this study addresses the gap between normative theological claims and empirical social realities. Such inquiry is significant for advancing interdisciplinary dialogue between Islamic studies, anthropology, and well-being research.

This study offers a state-of-the-art contribution by integrating ethnographic methodology with a holistic well-being framework to analyze the lived reception of Ihya Ulumuddin. Rather than examining the text solely as doctrinal heritage, the research conceptualizes it as a dynamic pedagogical instrument shaping intellectual consciousness, ethical refinement, and social responsibility. The novelty lies in foregrounding the dialogical interaction between text, teacher, and community, demonstrating how classical spirituality is recontextualized in everyday life. By documenting processes of reflective thinking, disciplined worship, and communal solidarity, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of religious gatherings toward a nuanced understanding of transformative learning. This approach highlights the practical continuity of classical Islamic spirituality within contemporary society and positions local study circles as laboratories of moral formation and psychosocial resilience.

Based on these considerations, the central research problem concerns how collective engagement with Ihya Ulumuddin in a rural Indonesian study circle produces transformative effects on participants' holistic quality of life. The study asks: in what ways does sustained participation cultivate intellectual enrichment, spiritual purification, ethical conduct, and social responsibility? The working argument posits that the integration of textual study, communal interaction, and reflective practice generates a synergistic process bridging knowledge and embodied action. Through ethnographic inquiry, the research contends that classical Islamic spirituality, when practiced collectively and contextually, fosters measurable improvements in spiritual, psychological, moral, and social well-being. By empirically substantiating this claim, the study contributes to broader debates on the relevance of classical religious

traditions in addressing contemporary human challenges and offers a grounded model of transformative religious learning.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with an ethnographic (Harwati, 2019; Khanal, 2016) approach to explore the lived experiences and transformative processes emerging from collective engagement with Ihya Ulumuddin by Imam Al-Ghazali. An ethnographic framework was selected because the research seeks to understand meanings, practices, and patterns of interaction within a naturally occurring religious community. Rather than measuring variables statistically, this approach enables in-depth interpretation of how participants construct spiritual, intellectual, and moral transformation through sustained textual study. Ethnography is particularly appropriate for examining religious gatherings, as it captures ritual dynamics, embodied practices, and informal social exchanges that shape communal identity. Through prolonged engagement and immersive observation, the researcher was able to document not only verbal narratives but also behavioral changes and symbolic expressions. The design thus aligns with the study's objective to analyze holistic quality of life as a socially situated and culturally mediated phenomenon.

The research was conducted in Ganjaran Village, Gondanglegi, Malang, where a weekly Tuesday-night study circle dedicated to Ihya Ulumuddin has been consistently maintained for several years. This site was purposively selected due to its sustained tradition of collective textual learning and its heterogeneous congregation. The village represents a semi-rural Muslim community in which religious life remains closely integrated with social and economic activities. The study circle is recognized locally as a respected forum for spiritual refinement and ethical guidance, attracting participants from diverse occupational and educational backgrounds. Its continuity, structured format, and active participation provide a rich context for examining processes of spiritual internalization and communal bonding. Furthermore, the accessibility of the site allowed prolonged engagement and repeated observation, strengthening the depth and credibility of ethnographic data. The location therefore offered a relevant and information-rich setting aligned with the research objectives.

Data were collected from forty male informants selected through purposive sampling to ensure variation in age and social background. The participants consisted of seven individuals aged 25–35 years, twenty-two aged 36–45 years, and eleven aged 46–63 years. All informants regularly attended the study circle and represented diverse professions, including community leaders, entrepreneurs, teachers, small-scale business owners, and agricultural laborers. Data collection techniques included participant observation, in depth semi structured interviews, and documentation review (Chand, 2025; Dias et al., 2019; Hui & Scerbo, 2026; Olenik, Nicole, 2021). Participant observation enabled the researcher to record interaction patterns, modes of textual interpretation, and ritual practices during the sessions. Interviews explored participants' motivations, perceived transformations, and interpretations of tazkiyat al-nafs in everyday life. Documentation, such as attendance records and teaching materials, provided contextual support. This triangulated strategy ensured comprehensive understanding of both experiential narratives and observable behavioral changes within the community.

Data analysis followed an iterative process involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Bingham, 2023; Kalpokaite, 2019; Mezmir, 2020; Monaro et al., 2022). During data condensation, field notes and interview transcripts were coded and reduced to identify central themes related to intellectual enrichment, spiritual purification, ethical refinement, and social responsibility. The reduced data were then organized into matrices and thematic charts to facilitate systematic comparison across age groups and occupational backgrounds. Verification was conducted through continuous cross-checking between observational findings and interview accounts to ensure interpretive consistency. To enhance trustworthiness, the study applied credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement and member checking, allowing participants to review interpretive summaries. Transferability was addressed through thick description of the research context. Dependability and confirmability were ensured by maintaining an audit trail of field decisions and analytic procedures, thereby enhancing methodological rigor and transparency.



## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### RESULT

#### Reactualizing Classical Islamic Spirituality and Its Transformative Impact on Holistic Quality of Life

Reactualizing Classical Islamic Spirituality” is operationally defined as the lived process through which participants internalize and actualize the ethical-spiritual teachings of Ihya Ulumuddin by Imam Al-Ghazali within everyday social, intellectual, and occupational practices. In the field context, reactualization does not merely signify textual comprehension but refers to a dynamic transformation encompassing reflective cognition, disciplined ritual practice, moral self-regulation, and strengthened communal responsibility. This operational meaning emerged from recurring narratives describing shifts in intention (niyyah), emotional control, and work ethics after sustained participation in the Tuesday-night study circle. Participants articulated spirituality as an embodied disposition shaping decisions in business, teaching, leadership, and family life. Thus, classical Islamic spirituality becomes experientially recontextualized through dialogical interpretation, collective remembrance, and practical application. Holistic quality of life, in this sense, integrates spiritual tranquility, psychological stability, ethical integrity, and constructive social engagement as interconnected dimensions of transformative religious learning.

**Table 1. Interview Data**

| Interview Excerpt                                                                                         | Indicator                                       | Informant                              |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| “After regularly attending the study circle, I evaluate my intentions before leading community meetings.” | Ethical self-reflection; leadership integrity   | Informant A (45, community leader)     |
| “The lessons on sincerity changed how I manage my business profits and employees.”                        | Moral accountability; professional ethics       | Informant B (38, entrepreneur)         |
| “I used to react emotionally; now I practice patience as taught in the book.”                             | Emotional regulation; tazkiyat al-nafs          | Informant C (29, teacher)              |
| “Reciting and discussing the text gives me inner calm after working in the fields.”                       | Spiritual tranquility; psychological well-being | Informant D (52, farm laborer)         |
| “I now see knowledge as something to practice, not just memorize.”                                        | Integration of ‘ilm and ‘amal                   | Informant E (34, small business owner) |

*(These excerpts represent patterns across 40 male informants: 7 aged 25–35, 22 aged 36–45, and 11 aged 46–63, from diverse occupational backgrounds.)*

The table demonstrates that transformative impact extends beyond ritual devotion into domains of leadership, economic activity, and emotional management. Informants across age groups articulate an internal shift from reactive behavior to reflective intentionality. Notably, participants in the 36–45 age cohort comprising the majority frequently associated spiritual learning with professional accountability and family responsibility, indicating that mid-life social roles intensify the practical application of ethical teachings. Younger participants emphasized emotional regulation and identity formation, while older informants highlighted tranquility and existential reassurance. This generational differentiation suggests that the text's influence adapts to life-stage priorities without losing its integrative character. Importantly, transformation is framed not as sudden conversion but as gradual moral calibration facilitated by repetitive study and communal reinforcement. The convergence of intellectual insight and embodied practice reflects a pedagogical process where textual discourse becomes internal moral dialogue, bridging doctrinal knowledge and lived ethics in measurable behavioral adjustments.

Across occupational categories, the findings reveal a pattern of ethical transference from sacred text to secular space. Entrepreneurs and business actors reported changes in financial transparency and employee relations, indicating that spirituality mediates economic conduct. Teachers described enhanced pedagogical patience and mentoring sensitivity, while laborers emphasized resilience and gratitude amid hardship. Such narratives demonstrate that the study circle operates as a moral incubator generating socially productive dispositions. Rather than isolating spirituality within ritual settings, participants embed its principles within everyday labor structures. This phenomenon supports the argument that classical Sufi pedagogy can function as a psychosocial resource in contemporary contexts. The integration of *'ilm* and *'amal* appears not merely conceptual but behaviorally traceable. Consequently, holistic quality of life emerges as a composite outcome where intellectual growth, ethical discipline, and social trust reinforce one another through continuous collective engagement with the text.



Field observations substantiate interview claims by revealing consistent behavioral patterns during and beyond the study sessions. Participants arrived punctually, engaged attentively in textual discussion, and frequently related passages to personal experiences. Informal interactions after the recitation often involved ethical consultation regarding business disputes or family concerns, indicating that the gathering functions as a moral support network. The researcher observed respectful dialogical exchanges between older and younger members, reflecting intergenerational transmission of values. Moreover, expressions of humility and gratitude were evident in communal prayers and charitable initiatives coordinated by participants. These practices demonstrate that spiritual discourse translates into collective social action. The embodied discipline such as attentive listening, moderated speech, and structured reflection corroborates narratives of enhanced self-regulation. Thus, observational data reinforce the interpretation that reactualized classical spirituality shapes both subjective consciousness and communal behavior in observable, sustained ways.

Restated analytically, the data indicate that sustained engagement with Ihya Ulumuddin fosters a patterned transformation characterized by reflective intentionality, emotional moderation, ethical accountability, and strengthened communal solidarity. The dominant pattern across age and profession is the internalization of moral vigilance preceding action, particularly in leadership and economic roles. Younger informants exhibit identity-oriented growth, middle-aged participants demonstrate professional ethical refinement, and older members express spiritual serenity and social mentorship. Collectively, these patterns reveal a cyclical dynamic: textual study generates reflection; reflection shapes conduct; conduct reinforces communal trust; and communal trust deepens commitment to study. Holistic quality of life therefore manifests as an interconnected system rather than isolated outcomes. The data suggest that classical Islamic spirituality, when communally enacted, produces multidimensional well-being through sustained moral rehearsal and shared interpretive engagement.

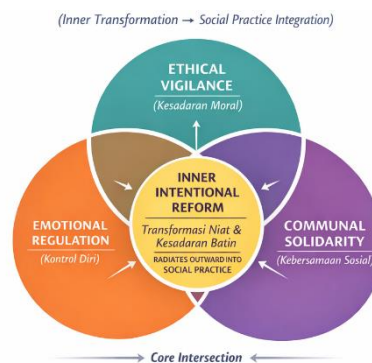
**Table 2. Ideal Influence Pattern**

| Informant Position | Interview Excerpt                                         | Indicator                |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Community Leader   | "The book reminds me that authority is a trust (amanah)." | Ethical leadership       |
| Entrepreneur       | "Profit must align with sincerity and fairness."          | Moral economy            |
| Teacher            | "Teaching is worship when intention is purified."         | Pedagogical spirituality |
| Farm Laborer       | "Patience in hardship feels lighter after the lessons."   | Spiritual resilience     |

The ideal influence pattern illustrates how occupational roles mediate the application of spiritual teachings. Leadership positions internalize accountability as amanah, reframing authority within ethical stewardship. Economic actors reinterpret profit-seeking through moral intentionality, reflecting an alignment between spirituality and market behavior. Educators conceptualize pedagogy as devotional practice, integrating professional competence with spiritual purpose. Laborers emphasize endurance and gratitude, demonstrating that spiritual resilience transcends socioeconomic status.

Collectively, the table reveals a cross-sectoral moral diffusion where spiritual principles inform distinct professional logics without homogenizing them. The unifying thread is intentional consciousness preceding action. This suggests that reactualized classical spirituality functions as a meta-ethical framework adaptable to varied life domains, reinforcing the integrative thesis of holistic quality of life.

The overall pattern indicates that transformation radiates from inner intentional reform toward outward social practice. Ethical vigilance, emotional regulation, and communal solidarity consistently emerge as interconnected outcomes across generational and occupational differences.



**Picture 1. Inner Transformation → Social Practice Integration**

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm and extend existing scholarship on *Ihya Ulumuddin* by Imam Al-Ghazali, which has long emphasized its integrative synthesis of jurisprudence, ethics, and Sufism (Nahidin et al., 2024; Nasrun, 2025; Nurlinda, 2024; Ridha et al., 2025). Classical studies portray the text as a comprehensive manual of moral reform, yet they often remain confined to doctrinal or philosophical analysis. The present ethnographic evidence supports the claim that Al-Ghazali's project bridges 'ilm and 'amal, demonstrating observable behavioral transformation among participants. However, unlike purely textual analyses, this study shows how such integration unfolds through collective pedagogy and dialogical engagement in a rural Indonesian setting. The compatibility between normative theological claims and lived practice strengthens the argument that classical Islamic spirituality retains contemporary relevance (Discourses, 2025; Gul, 2025; Nahidin et al., 2024). At the same time, the findings nuance earlier assumptions by revealing that transformation is gradual, socially mediated, and reinforced by communal interaction rather than solely by individual contemplation.

Compared with psychological studies linking religiosity and well-being, the results align with research indicating positive correlations between spiritual practice and emotional regulation, resilience, and life satisfaction (Dolcos et al., 2021; Graca, Lidia, 2024; Surzykiewicz & Skalski, 2022; Tuba et al., 2024). Nevertheless, prior quantitative research often isolates variables such as coping strategies or ritual frequency without examining pedagogical processes. This study diverges by demonstrating that structured textual engagement within a study circle fosters reflective intentionality and ethical accountability, not merely emotional comfort (Smith et al., 2025). The data indicate that intellectual enrichment and moral discipline are inseparable components of spiritual well being (Kader, 2026; Sehati et al., 2024). Such findings challenge reductionist models that treat religion as therapeutic utility detached from doctrinal depth. Instead, they highlight the formative role of sustained interpretive interaction with a classical text. The ethnographic perspective therefore contributes a layered understanding of how spirituality operates simultaneously at cognitive, affective, and social levels within a coherent moral framework.

Theoretically, the study advances discussions in anthropology of religion and Islamic studies by proposing that reactualized classical spirituality functions as a meta-ethical system embedded in communal practice. Rather than conceptualizing Sufi texts as static heritage, the findings position them as dynamic pedagogical instruments shaping moral subjectivity. This perspective resonates with theories of transformative learning, yet it introduces a distinctly Islamic epistemological dimension grounded in tazkiyat al-nafs. The cyclical pattern identified textual study, reflection, ethical action, and communal reinforcement offers a conceptual model for understanding holistic quality of life as relationally constructed. Consequently, the research contributes to interdisciplinary debates on spirituality and well-being by integrating theological content with ethnographic evidence. It reframes holistic well-being not merely as psychological satisfaction but as harmonization of inner disposition and social responsibility.

Practically, the findings suggest that community-based study circles can serve as effective platforms for character formation and psychosocial resilience (Fu & Id, 2024; Morales et al., 2023; Saul & Simon, 2016). The integration of moral discourse with everyday occupational roles indicates that religious education need not remain confined to ritual instruction. Community leaders, entrepreneurs, teachers, and laborers reported tangible changes in ethical decision making, professional conduct, and interpersonal relations. These outcomes imply that structured engagement with classical texts can strengthen social trust and ethical governance at grassroots levels (Andrew Osehi Enaifoghe, 2019; Ma, Xin, Mohd Shukri Ab. Yajid, Ali Khatibi, 2026; Qin, 2023). For policymakers and religious educators, the study underscores the importance of dialogical pedagogy and sustained participation rather than sporadic preaching. The practical implication is that spiritual literacy, when cultivated collectively, may enhance both personal discipline and communal cohesion, contributing to broader social stability.

Finally, the discussion highlights the broader significance of bridging classical tradition and contemporary lived realities. The study demonstrates that the teachings of Ihya Ulumuddin are not confined to historical scholarship but remain adaptable to modern socioeconomic contexts. While earlier literature sometimes portrayed Sufi

spirituality as inward-oriented or socially withdrawn, the findings reveal active ethical engagement in professional and communal spheres. This difference underscores the necessity of empirical inquiry into lived religion. By documenting measurable improvements in spiritual, psychological, moral, and social dimensions, the research substantiates claims regarding the transformative potential of classical Islamic spirituality. It thus provides both theoretical refinement and practical guidance for future initiatives seeking to revitalize religious learning as a source of holistic human development.

## CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is that sustained engagement with *Ihya Ulumuddin* by Imam Al-Ghazali within a structured communal setting generates multidimensional transformation encompassing intellectual awareness, spiritual purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), ethical discipline, and social responsibility. The principal lesson derived from this research is that classical Islamic spirituality retains transformative power when reactualized through dialogical pedagogy and collective practice. Rather than functioning solely as a doctrinal reference, the text becomes a lived ethical framework shaping intentionality, emotional regulation, and professional conduct. Holistic quality of life emerges as an integrative construct linking inner disposition with outward action. The study demonstrates that moral reform is neither instantaneous nor abstract; it develops gradually through repetitive learning, reflective engagement, and communal reinforcement. Thus, the enduring wisdom of classical Islamic scholarship can effectively respond to contemporary moral and psychosocial challenges when embodied within participatory learning environments.

The strength of this research lies in its interdisciplinary contribution, bridging Islamic studies, anthropology of religion, and well-being research through an ethnographic lens. By situating *Ihya Ulumuddin* within lived communal practice, the study moves beyond normative theological exposition toward empirically grounded analysis of transformative religious learning. Conceptually, it advances a model of reactualized classical spirituality as a meta-ethical system integrating *'ilm* and *'amal*

within everyday life. Methodologically, prolonged engagement and triangulated data collection enhance analytical depth and credibility. The research also contributes to theoretical discussions on holistic well-being by redefining it as a relational and spiritually embedded phenomenon rather than a purely psychological metric. In doing so, the study offers a contextualized framework for examining how sacred texts shape moral subjectivity and communal cohesion, thereby enriching contemporary debates on the relevance of religious traditions in modern society.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that open avenues for future research. First, the focus on a single rural community limits generalizability across diverse socio-cultural contexts, particularly urban or transnational settings. Second, all informants were male, restricting insight into potential gendered dimensions of spiritual transformation. Third, the qualitative design emphasizes depth over quantifiable measurement, leaving room for complementary mixed-method approaches to assess long-term well-being outcomes. Future studies could conduct comparative ethnographies across multiple regions or examine intergenerational transmission of ethical values within families influenced by the study circle. Incorporating female participants and youth perspectives would broaden analytical scope. Longitudinal research could further explore how sustained engagement with classical texts shapes life trajectories over time. Such extensions would deepen understanding of how classical Islamic spirituality continues to evolve and contribute to holistic human development in varied contemporary environments.

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