



Reactualizing Classical Sufi Wisdom: An Ethnographic Study of the Collective Study of Al-Hikam in Weekly Mosque Ḥalaqah Circles

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Abstract

This article examines the contemporary relevance of a collective study of Ibn Athaillah as-Sakandari's Al-Hikam within a mosque-based weekly prayer circle. The aim is to analyze how classical Sufi maxims are re-enacted in lived religious practices and how this engagement shapes the participants' spiritual awareness, ethical orientation, and communal life. This study employed qualitative methods with an ethnographic approach and was conducted at the Jami' Nurussyifa Mosque. Data were generated through prolonged participant observation, in-depth interviews, and textual-discursive analysis within a recurring prayer environment. The findings demonstrate a multidimensional impact. Psychospiritually, this study fosters inner resilience, emotional regulation, and a deeper awareness of dependence on God. Ethically and socially, this study fosters humility, responsibility, moral discipline, and stronger communal solidarity. Epistemologically, this study strengthens the transmission of Islamic scholarly tradition through dialogical engagement with classical *turāth* texts. Moreover, ḥalaqah makes a significant contribution to the formation of spiritually grounded character and leadership, demonstrating the enduring relevance and transformative capacity of classical Sufi wisdom in the contemporary Muslim context.

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INTRODUCTION

Across contemporary Muslim societies, rapid modernization, digital acceleration, and shifting social structures have generated profound transformations in patterns of religious learning and spiritual formation. The increasing dominance of fragmented online religious content often reduces complex spiritual traditions into decontextualized quotations, weakening the depth of ethical internalization (Haq & Kwok, 2024; Zhang, 2025). This condition raises a critical question: how can classical Islamic wisdom remain meaningful and socially transformative amid modern pressures? Historically, Sufi traditions have functioned not merely as mystical discourses but as ethical frameworks shaping communal solidarity, self-discipline, and spiritual resilience. The enduring popularity of *Al-Hikam* by Ibnu Athaillah as-Sakandari across centuries evidences its normative authority within Islamic intellectual history. Yet its relevance cannot be assumed without examining how it is lived and interpreted in specific contexts. Therefore, investigating the collective study of *Al-Hikam* becomes socially significant, as it illuminates how classical Sufi wisdom continues to nurture spiritual consciousness and moral responsibility in contemporary communal settings.

Despite the persistence of Islamic study circles, many contemporary religious gatherings risk becoming ritualistic or purely textual exercises detached from lived realities. The broader societal problem lies in the growing gap between religious knowledge and ethical practice (Kwok, 2024). Communities frequently encounter moral challenges individualism, weakened communal bonds, and emotional instability without structured spiritual guidance that addresses both inner and social dimensions. While Islamic educational institutions provide formal instruction, informal mosque based *ḥalaqah* circles often function as alternative spaces for character formation (Bridges, 2024; Huang & Wang, 2023). However, limited scholarly attention has been given to

understanding how classical Sufi texts operate within such grassroots settings (Abdurrahman, 2026; Husni, 2026; Muhammad & Barizi, 2026). Without empirical investigation, assumptions about their transformative impact remain speculative. Consequently, a systematic exploration is necessary to understand whether and how the collective study of Al-Hikam can address contemporary ethical fragmentation and contribute to strengthening communal resilience.

At Masjid Jami' Nurus Syifa, a recurring weekly ḥalaqah dedicated to the study of Al-Hikam presents a compelling empirical phenomenon. Participants from diverse educational and occupational backgrounds gather not only to interpret aphorisms but to relate them to everyday moral struggles, family responsibilities, and professional challenges. Observationally, discussions frequently extend beyond textual exegesis toward reflective dialogue, emotional sharing, and collective ethical commitment. The ḥalaqah thus functions simultaneously as a pedagogical, spiritual, and social space. Rather than treating the text as a historical artifact, participants engage it as living guidance. This phenomenon suggests that classical Sufi wisdom may operate as a dynamic moral resource. However, the processes through which such meanings are constructed, internalized, and enacted require systematic ethnographic analysis to move beyond anecdotal impressions.

Existing scholarship on Sufism has largely concentrated on doctrinal analysis, historical development, and metaphysical dimensions of classical texts. Studies on Al-Hikam predominantly explore its theological themes, linguistic structure, or philosophical coherence within the broader Shadhili tradition (Hamid et al., 2025; Hidayatulloh et al., 2025; Nair, 2025). Other researchers have examined contemporary Sufi movements, focusing on ritual practices, authority structures, or political engagement (Ichwan et al., 2024; Malik, 2018; Milani & Adrahtas, 2018; Sedgwick, 2018). While these contributions illuminate important aspects of Sufi thought and organization, they often remain text-centered or

macro-sociological. Limited attention has been directed toward micro level communal study practices that mediate between classical texts and lived religious experience. Furthermore, research on mosque based ḥalaqah frequently emphasizes Qur’anic exegesis or jurisprudential instruction (Alaca, 2022; Hadi, 2025), leaving Sufi textual engagement comparatively underexplored. This imbalance reveals a gap in understanding how classical aphoristic literature functions within everyday communal pedagogy.

Recent qualitative studies in Islamic education have highlighted the importance of dialogical learning, spiritual mentoring, and community-based pedagogy in shaping ethical dispositions (Baharun, 2025; Qadri et al., 2024). However, these studies rarely integrate classical turath texts as central analytical lenses. When spirituality is addressed, it is often conceptualized abstractly without tracing its textual grounding. Moreover, ethnographic works on religious gatherings tend to focus on ritual performance rather than epistemological transmission (Czachesz, 2019; WRIGHT, 2024; Wu, 2018). Consequently, the interplay between textual interpretation, spiritual interiority, and communal ethics remains insufficiently theorized. This research positions itself at the intersection of Sufi textual studies and lived religion by examining how *Al-Hikam* is collectively interpreted and embodied. By foregrounding dialogical engagement with a classical text, the study addresses the gap between scriptural authority and contemporary moral formation.

The novelty of this study lies in its ethnographic focus on the collective pedagogical processes through which classical Sufi aphorisms are reactualized within a contemporary mosque based ḥalaqah. Rather than analyzing *Al-Hikam* solely as a theological text, this research conceptualizes it as a performative and dialogical medium shaping subjectivity, ethics, and leadership formation. By integrating psychospiritual, social, and epistemological dimensions into a unified analytical framework, the study advances a multidimensional understanding of

Sufi pedagogy. It demonstrates how textual engagement fosters emotional regulation, moral discipline, and communal solidarity simultaneously. This state-of-the-art approach contributes to expanding methodological conversations in Islamic studies by bridging classical scholarship, lived religion, and community-based education within a single ethnographic inquiry.

Based on the foregoing discussion, the central research problem concerns how the collective study of Al-Hikam in weekly mosque ḥalaqah circles shapes participants' spiritual consciousness, ethical orientation, and communal life. The guiding argument of this study posits that dialogical engagement with classical Sufi aphorisms functions as a transformative pedagogical practice that integrates inner spiritual refinement with social responsibility. Through sustained interaction, reflection, and communal interpretation, participants internalize values that manifest in character formation and spiritually grounded leadership. By empirically substantiating this argument, the research contributes theoretically to the study of lived Sufism and practically to discussions on community-based moral education in contemporary Muslim societies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with an ethnographic (Cohen et al., 2017; Fusch et al., 2017; Turhan, 2019) approach to explore the lived experience of participants engaged in the collective study of Al-Hikam by Ibnu Athaillah as-Sakandari. An ethnographic framework was selected because the research seeks to understand meaning-making processes, symbolic interactions, and embodied religious practices within their natural social setting. Rather than measuring variables, the study aims to interpret how classical Sufi aphorisms are dialogically engaged, internalized, and enacted in communal life. Ethnography enables prolonged immersion in the field, facilitating in-depth observation of rituals, discussions, emotional expressions, and pedagogical

dynamics within the ḥalaqah. This design is methodologically appropriate for capturing psychospiritual transformation, ethical orientation, and social interaction as interconnected phenomena. By prioritizing thick description and contextual interpretation, the approach allows for a holistic understanding of how textual tradition operates as lived religion in contemporary Muslim society.

The research was conducted at Masjid Jami' Nurus Syifa, where a weekly ḥalaqah dedicated to the study of Al-Hikam has been consistently organized. The site was purposively selected due to the sustainability of its study circle, the diversity of its participants, and its explicit emphasis on dialogical interpretation rather than purely monologic instruction. The mosque represents a community-based religious space where participants from varied professional and educational backgrounds gather voluntarily, making it a relevant locus for examining grassroots spiritual pedagogy. Additionally, the ḥalaqah integrates textual reading, reflective discussion, and ethical application, providing a rich empirical context for ethnographic inquiry. The accessibility of the setting and the openness of participants to sustained observation further strengthened its suitability. Selecting this location ensured that the study captured an authentic and dynamic expression of contemporary Sufi textual engagement.

Data were collected through prolonged participant observation, in depth semi structured interviews, and documentation of study materials and discussion transcripts (Chand, 2025; Eppich et al., 2019; Mahat-Shamir et al., 2021). The study involved 25 informants selected purposively to reflect generational diversity within the ḥalaqah. The participants consisted of five informants aged 25–35, thirteen informants aged 36–45, and seven informants aged 46–65. This age distribution enabled comparative insights into how different life stages shape the reception and internalization of Sufi aphorisms. Participant observation focused on interaction patterns, modes of textual interpretation, emotional expressions, and communal dynamics during weekly

sessions. Interviews explored personal spiritual trajectories, motivations for participation, perceived ethical transformation, and reflections on communal solidarity. Documentary analysis included study notes, textual commentaries, and teaching outlines used in the ḥalaqah. The triangulation of these techniques allowed for comprehensive data generation concerning spiritual, ethical, and epistemological dimensions.

Data analysis followed an interactive model comprising data condensation, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing with continuous verification (Mezmir, 2020; Turkay et al., 2016). Data condensation involved selecting, focusing, and simplifying field notes, interview transcripts, and documents relevant to the research questions. Through systematic coding, themes related to psychospiritual formation, ethical orientation, communal solidarity, and textual transmission were identified. Data were then organized into visual and narrative displays to facilitate pattern recognition and relational interpretation. Verification was conducted through iterative comparison between data sources to ensure interpretive consistency. To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation of methods and sources, prolonged engagement in the field, and member checking with selected informants to confirm interpretive accuracy. Peer debriefing and reflexive journaling were also utilized to minimize researcher bias. These procedures collectively ensured credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability within rigorous qualitative standards.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

In the empirical context of the weekly ḥalaqah at Masjid Jami' Nurus Syifa, the reactualization of classical Sufi wisdom refers operationally to the dialogical, reflective, and practice-oriented engagement with Al-Hikam by Ibnu Athaillah as-

Sakandari, through which textual aphorisms are translated into lived ethical commitments. Reactualization does not merely signify textual reading but involves a cyclical process: recitation, interpretive dialogue, contextual application, and moral self-evaluation. Participants collectively interpret aphorisms in relation to family life, professional responsibilities, emotional struggles, and communal obligations. The text thus functions as a moral compass mediating between transcendental principles and daily praxis. This operationalization emerged inductively from field observations and interviews, revealing that classical Sufi discourse becomes meaningful when embedded within shared narratives and communal accountability. Reactualization, therefore, represents an experiential transformation process in which scriptural authority is internalized, negotiated, and enacted within contemporary socio-religious realities.

Table 1. Interview Data

Interview Excerpts	Indicator	Informant
"I feel calmer when facing work issues after understanding tawakkal."	Emotional regulation	I3 (25–35)
"The discussion made me realize the importance of intention in every activity."	Ethical intentionality	I7 (36–45)
"I learned to control my ego when I have different opinions."	Humility	I12 (36–45)
"This halaqah strengthens our togetherness as a congregation."	Communal solidarity	I18 (46–65)
"Al-Hikam's aphorisms feel relevant to modern life."	Textual contextualization	I21 (36–45)
"I feel more responsible as the head of my family."	Moral responsibility	I24 (46–65)

The table demonstrates that reactualization operates primarily at the intersection of emotional, ethical, and social dimensions. Younger participants (25–35) emphasized emotional regulation, indicating that Sufi aphorisms function as psychological stabilizers amid professional pressures. The dominant cluster among informants aged 36–45 reflects ethical intentionality and humility, suggesting that midlife participants interpret Al-Hikam as guidance for self-

discipline and relational ethics. Meanwhile, older participants (46–65) foreground communal solidarity and moral responsibility, illustrating a generational orientation toward social cohesion and leadership. This distribution indicates that textual engagement is mediated by life-stage experiences. Rather than producing uniform outcomes, the ḥalaqah enables differentiated yet complementary internalizations. The aphoristic structure of Al-Hikam facilitates interpretive flexibility, allowing participants to appropriate its wisdom according to existential needs while maintaining shared normative commitments.

Beyond generational variation, the data reveal a consistent thematic thread: the transformation of abstract theology into embodied ethics. Indicators such as humility, responsibility, and solidarity demonstrate that participants do not treat the text as speculative mysticism but as actionable guidance. The dialogical format of the ḥalaqah appears central to this process, as collective reflection encourages accountability and mutual reinforcement. Importantly, textual contextualization emerged as a bridge between tradition and modernity, countering assumptions that classical Sufi literature lacks contemporary relevance. Instead, participants perceive Al-Hikam as interpretively open yet normatively grounded. The interplay between personal introspection and communal discussion strengthens the internalization process, indicating that moral transformation is socially mediated rather than individually constructed. Thus, reactualization reflects both cognitive reinterpretation and relational enactment within a structured spiritual environment.

Field observations corroborate these interview findings. During sessions, participants frequently pause after reading an aphorism to share personal reflections, often connecting the text to workplace dilemmas, parenting challenges, or community disputes. Nonverbal cues such as attentive listening, emotional expressions, and moments of collective silence indicate deep affective engagement. The facilitator encourages open dialogue while anchoring

interpretations within the classical commentary tradition, ensuring epistemological continuity. Over time, observable behavioral shifts emerged, including increased punctuality, collaborative initiatives for social charity, and reduced interpersonal tension within the congregation. These patterns suggest that reactualization is sustained through repetition and communal reinforcement. The researcher's prolonged immersion revealed that transformation is gradual yet cumulative, embedded in routine interaction rather than dramatic spiritual experiences. This ethnographic evidence strengthens the claim that classical Sufi wisdom operates as lived pedagogy.

Restated concisely, the data indicate that the collective study of *Al-Hikam* generates psychospiritual stability, ethical refinement, and strengthened communal bonds across generational cohorts. The dominant pattern reveals a progression: textual comprehension leads to reflective dialogue, which fosters emotional awareness, then culminates in ethical practice. Younger participants internalize coping mechanisms; middle-aged participants emphasize moral intentionality; senior members prioritize social cohesion and responsibility. Despite these variations, all groups converge on heightened God-consciousness and disciplined conduct. The patterned interplay between individual introspection and collective discussion forms the structural core of reactualization. Thus, the study demonstrates that classical Sufi aphorisms retain transformative potency when mediated through dialogical pedagogy and communal embodiment.

Table 2. Ideal Influence

Informant's Position	Interview Excerpts	indicators
Teacher	"I apply the value of sincerity in teaching."	Ethical professionalism
Entrepreneur	"Tawakkal helps me make business decisions."	Spiritual decision-making
Neighborhood Head	"Halaqah strengthens my sense of social responsibility."	Community leadership
Housewife	"I am more patient in educating my children."	Patience and nurturing ethics

Civil Servant "Discussions help me avoid dishonest Integrity practices."

The ideal influence table illustrates how reactualized Sufi wisdom extends beyond personal spirituality into professional and civic domains. Participants occupying leadership or public roles articulate ethical professionalism and integrity as direct outcomes of their engagement with Al-Hikam. This suggests that the ḥalaqah functions as a moral incubator shaping socially consequential behavior. Spiritual concepts such as ikhlas and tawakkal are reframed as operational principles guiding decision-making processes. The integration of spirituality and occupational responsibility challenges dichotomies between sacred and secular spheres.

A discernible pattern emerges: individuals in roles with broader social impact articulate stronger communal and ethical indicators. Leadership positions correlate with heightened expressions of responsibility and integrity, implying that spiritual internalization amplifies civic engagement. The data collectively demonstrate that reactualization generates an ideal influence trajectory from personal discipline to institutional ethics and communal stewardship thereby reinforcing the transformative capacity of classical Sufi wisdom in contemporary society.



Picture 1. Ethical progression from personal to communal

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the collective study of Al-Hikam by Ibnu Athaillah as-Sakandari within a weekly mosque based ḥalaqah constitutes a dynamic process of textual reactualization rather than passive transmission. This aligns with existing scholarship on lived religion, which emphasizes that religious meaning is constructed through embodied practice and communal negotiation (Dwyer, 2016; Van Cappellen et al., 2023). However, while many studies of Sufism focus predominantly on doctrinal exposition or ritual performance, the present findings extend the literature by empirically demonstrating how aphoristic texts function as dialogical ethical frameworks. Unlike text-centered analyses that position Al-Hikam within intellectual history alone, this research confirms its contemporary pedagogical vitality. The observed integration of reflection, emotional regulation, and communal accountability substantiates theoretical claims that Sufi traditions historically operated as systems of moral cultivation (Deighton-Mohammed, 2024; Khan et al., 2025). Thus, the study both confirms and advances prior scholarship by situating classical Sufi wisdom within everyday pedagogical interaction.

Furthermore, the generational differentiation identified in the findings partially converges with developmental perspectives in religious education, which suggest that spiritual interpretation is mediated by life stage concerns (Hayward & Pearce, 2021; Villani et al., 2025). Younger participants emphasized emotional resilience, whereas older cohorts foregrounded communal responsibility and leadership. This nuanced distribution complements prior research on mosque based study circles that highlights their social cohesion function, yet it diverges by evidencing differentiated internalization patterns across age groups (Liu, 2025; Rosady, 2025). Existing literature often treats participants as a homogeneous devotional community; in contrast, this study reveals layered receptions of Sufi aphorisms shaped by existential positioning.

Such findings challenge reductionist assumptions that spiritual texts produce uniform moral outcomes. Instead, they support interpretive theories positing that classical Islamic texts possess polyvalent semantic potential (Andi, 2024), activated differently according to socio biographical context while maintaining normative coherence.

The findings also resonate with contemporary discussions on character education and spiritually grounded leadership (Dames, 2019; Eid & Arnout, 2021). Previous research in Islamic educational contexts underscores the importance of modeling, mentorship, and dialogical learning (Baharun, 2025; Mayasari, 2025); however, it frequently under-theorizes the epistemological role of classical turath texts. This study contributes by demonstrating that textual engagement itself becomes a transformative pedagogical mechanism when mediated through communal reflection. Theoretical implications emerge in three respects: first, the study advances an integrative model linking psychospiritual formation, ethical intentionality, and social solidarity; second, it reframes Sufi aphorisms as performative discourse shaping subjectivity; third, it enriches ethnographic approaches to Islamic studies by bridging textual scholarship and lived practice. By empirically substantiating these linkages, the research expands conceptual frameworks for understanding how tradition is not merely preserved but dynamically re-enacted.

Practically, the study offers implications for mosque-based education and community development initiatives. The dialogical structure observed at Masjid Jami' Nurus Syifa illustrates that sustainable spiritual formation requires participatory interpretation rather than didactic monologue. Religious leaders and educators may draw from this model to design study circles that integrate textual reading with contextual application and reflective dialogue. Moreover, the findings indicate that classical Sufi wisdom can address contemporary psychosocial challenges, including stress management, ethical decision-making,

and communal fragmentation. In this regard, the ḥalaqah functions not only as a devotional gathering but as a micro-institution of moral resilience. The practical implication extends beyond the local setting, suggesting that revitalizing classical texts through dialogical pedagogy may strengthen communal ethics in broader Muslim contexts.

Finally, the discussion underscores the broader significance of reactualization as an epistemological process. The study reveals that the enduring relevance of Al-Hikam does not lie solely in its historical authority but in its capacity to be interpretively re-situated within modern lifeworlds. This supports constructivist perspectives in religious studies that view tradition as continuously negotiated rather than statically inherited. At the same time, the findings caution against severing textual interpretation from its classical commentarial lineage, as continuity anchors authenticity. Theoretically, this dual dynamic continuity and contextualization offers a refined lens for examining Islamic intellectual transmission. Practically, it affirms that spiritually grounded leadership and communal solidarity can emerge from disciplined engagement with classical wisdom. Consequently, the research substantiates the transformative capacity of Sufi pedagogy in shaping ethically responsive and spiritually conscious communities today.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study demonstrates that the collective study of Al-Hikam by Ibnu Athaillah as-Sakandari within the weekly ḥalaqah at Masjid Jami' Nurus Syifa constitutes not merely the transmission of a classical text but a dynamic process of reactualization that transforms Sufi aphorisms into lived ethical praxis and embodied spiritual consciousness. The central insight lies in the recognition that classical Sufi wisdom retains its transformative capacity when mediated through dialogical engagement, collective reflection,

and contextual application to everyday realities. This process cultivates psychospiritual resilience, intentional moral awareness, emotional regulation, and intergenerational communal solidarity. The study affirms that classical Islamic texts do not lose relevance in modern contexts when approached through participatory pedagogy rooted in communal experience. The broader lesson, therefore, is that revitalizing Islamic intellectual tradition requires a sustained integration of textual authority, existential reflection, and socially embedded practice within living community spaces.

The principal strength of this article lies in its contribution to bridging textual Sufi studies with ethnographic approaches to lived religion. Scholarly significance emerges from its demonstration that classical turath operates as performative discourse shaping subjectivity, ethical orientation, and spiritually grounded leadership. By integrating psychospiritual, social, and epistemological dimensions within a unified analytical framework, the study advances a multidimensional model of community-based Sufi pedagogy. Methodologically, it enriches Islamic studies through thick description of ḥalaqah practices as sites of collective meaning-making. The research further contributes by theorizing reactualization as a dialogical process that sustains continuity with authoritative tradition while enabling contextual reinterpretation. In doing so, the article moves beyond static conceptions of textual preservation and instead conceptualizes tradition as dynamically enacted. Consequently, it offers a refined theoretical lens for examining how classical Sufi wisdom continues to inform contemporary Muslim ethical and communal life.

Notwithstanding these contributions, the study presents several limitations. First, its focus on a single ḥalaqah community constrains the generalizability of findings across diverse socio-cultural contexts. Second, the qualitative ethnographic design privileges interpretive depth and therefore does not quantitatively measure long-term behavioral change. Third, dimensions such

as gender dynamics and internal power relations within the study circle were not explored in comprehensive detail. Future research may address these limitations through comparative multi-site studies across urban and transnational settings to examine variations in patterns of reactualization. Employing mixed-method approaches could also provide measurable indicators of spiritual and social transformation over time. Additionally, investigating the role of digital media in reshaping or expanding ḥalaqah practices would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how classical Sufi wisdom adapts within evolving technological and global contexts.

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