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# THE RECONSTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS HUMANISM IN THE THOUGHT OF EMHA AINUN NAJIB

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**Abstract**

*An understanding of the human self-concept reveals the essence and existence necessary to attain the noble status of a cultured individual. However, for humans to achieve this status, they must recognize the primary purpose of creation. The challenge of understanding one's position and duty as a servant (abdun) and vicegerent (khalifah) requires the interpretation of religious scholars. Emha Ainun Najib, as a central figure in religion, culture, and the arts within his ma'iyah community, discusses the concept of the self from a Sufi perspective. Through a descriptive qualitative research approach using a literature review method, this study explores Cak Nun's thoughts as he articulates and situates classical Sufi teachings regarding self-identity within the context of contemporary Indonesian socio-cultural reality. Through a critical analysis of his works, this study produces a comprehensive examination. The conclusion of this research indicates that Emha Ainun Najib defines the concept of self as a consciousness possessing two dimensions: servitude (ubudiyah) and stewardship (khilafah). Transforming the self from the inauthentic self (nafs ammarah) toward the peaceful self (nafs mutmainnah) through spiritual purification (tazkiyatun nafs) and consistent remembrance of God (dzikir). True self-knowledge is the gateway to knowing God (ma'rifatullah). Cak Nun translates these profound Sufi concepts into a more accessible cultural form through poetry, essays, and the Maiyah forums. This research contributes to contemporary Islamic psychology and Sufi studies by demonstrating how traditional spiritual wisdom can address the modern identity crisis while remaining connected to real-world social experiences, offering practical guidance for cultivating a strong spiritual identity amidst modern challenges.*

***Keywords:*** *Self-Concept, Sufism, Spiritual Identity, Contemporary Islamic Thought*

**Abstrak**

Pemahaman terhadap konsep diri manusia akan menunjukkan esensi dan eksistensinya agar mencapai posisi mulia sebagai insan adabi. Namun, manusia pada posisinya harus mengenal

tugas utama penciptaan. Problematika memahami posisi dan tugasnya sebagai abdun dan khalifah membutuhkan interpretasi ulama'. Emha Ainun Najib sebagai salah satu tokoh sentral agama, budaya dan seni dengan komunitas ma'iyahnya membahas tentang konsep diri perspektif tasawuf. Melalui pendekatan penelitian kualitatif deskriptif dengan metode kajian kepustakaan akan mengeksplorasi pemikiran Cak Nun mengungkapkan dan menempatkan ajaran sufistik klasik mengenai identitas diri dalam konteks realitas sosial-budaya Indonesia masa kini. Dengan analisis kritis terhadap karya-karyanya, sehingga menghasilkan kajian yang komprehensif. Adapun kesimpulan dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa Emha Ainun Najib mendefinisikan konsep diri sebagai kesadaran yang memiliki dua dimensi, yaitu kehambaaan (ubudiyah) dan kekhalifahan (khilafah). Mentransformasikan diri dari yang tidak autentik (nafs ammarah) menuju diri yang damai (nafs mutmainnah) melalui pembersihan spiritual (tazkiyatun nafs) dan dzikir yang konsisten. Pengenalan diri yang sejati adalah pintu gerbang untuk mengenal Tuhan (ma'rifatullah). Cak Nun menggambarkan konsep-konsep sufistik yang mendalam tersebut ke dalam bentuk budaya yang lebih mudah dipahami melalui puisi, esai, dan forum Maiyah. Kontribusi penelitian ini memberikan sumbangan terhadap psikologi Islam masa kini dan kajian tasawuf dengan menjelaskan kebijaksanaan spiritual yang tradisional mampu mengatasi krisis identitas modern sambil tetap terhubung dengan pengalaman sosial yang nyata dengan memberikan arahan praktis agar terbentuk identitas spiritual yang kuat di tengah tantangan modern.
**Kata Kunci:** *Konsep Diri, Tasawuf, Identitas Spiritual, Pemikiran Islam Kontemporer*

## Introduction

In the course of life, human spirituality is constantly confronted with fundamental questions about who one is, where one comes from, and where one will return. These existential questions are not exclusive to modern Western philosophy; they have also been central to spiritual reflection within the Islamic tradition, particularly in Sufism. From a Sufi perspective, the concept of the self, or al-nafs, is the core that connects the psychological aspects of humanity with the spiritual and divine. In the context of Indonesia, which is rich in Islamic traditions, Sufi thought continues to evolve and interact with current socio-cultural realities. One figure who consistently integrates Sufi values into culture and society is Emha Ainun Najib, commonly known as Cak Nun, a cultural figure, writer, and Indonesian Islamic thinker whose works and ideas have had a significant impact on society.

Research on the concept of the self (nafs) from the perspectives of psychology and Islamic spirituality has been conducted extensively in recent years. The concept of nafs in the Qur'an indicates that self-understanding in Islam has many dimensions, involving physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects that are dynamically interconnected (Mulyani, 2022, p. 78). Meanwhile, the concept of self in Al-Ghazali's Sufi psychology asserts that tazkiyatun nafs—the

purification of the soul—constitutes the core of fostering a healthy self-concept from the perspective of classical Sufism (Hasan, 2021, p. 112). Ibn Arabi states that the concept of self is closely linked to the awareness of God's presence, the importance of the unity of being (wahdatul wujud), and its connection to human identity itself (Fauziah, 2022, p. 45). The concept of self is expressed in Javanese Sufism studies, which suggest that humans, within the context of local wisdom, also have a connection with God and nature (Hidayat, 2021, p. 33).

However, what is particularly interesting to explore in this study is the self-concept from a Sufi perspective, through an analysis of the thought of a contemporary figure from the Indonesian archipelago—in this case, Emha Ainun Najib—who blends Sufi traditions with current Indonesian cultural and social expressions.

The novelty of this study lies in its specific focus on Cak Nun's ideas as a representation of contextual Sufism in contemporary Indonesia. Unlike previous studies that have focused more on classical Sufi figures such as Al-Ghazali, Ibn Arabi, or Rumi, as well as Sufi studies within the context of modern psychology in general, this research seeks to investigate how a contemporary Indonesian thinker formulates, expresses, and disseminates Sufi concepts of the self in a language more attuned to local culture. Through his extensive body of work—including poetry, essays, and his Maiyah forums—Cak Nun offers a dynamic dimension of Sufism that is responsive to the challenges of the times; thus, this study is expected to fill an academic gap that remains largely unexplored in current Indonesian Sufism studies.

Based on the above explanation, this study identifies several research questions to be addressed: (1) How is the concept of self generally understood from a Sufi perspective within the Islamic tradition? (2) How does Cak Nun formulate and explore the concept of the self from a Sufi perspective through his works and thoughts? (3) What are the distinctive characteristics and contributions of Cak Nun's thought to the development of the Sufi concept of the self in the current Indonesian context? In answering these questions, this study employs a qualitative approach using the figure-study method—a method that seeks to reveal a figure's thoughts, ideas, and perspectives in a structured and in-depth manner. Research data was obtained through a literature review of Cak Nun's works, including books, poetry collections, essays, transcripts of Maiyah forums, and documented interviews. Analysis was conducted using hermeneutics to interpret Cak Nun's texts within the broader framework of the

Sufi tradition, as well as thematic analysis to identify key themes related to the concept of the self from a Sufi perspective.

This article aims to: first, present the concept of self from a Sufi perspective as the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis; second, examine and analyse Cak Nun's thoughts on the concept of self from a Sufi perspective in depth and systematically; third, to identify the uniqueness and relevance of Cak Nun's thought for the development of contemporary Sufi discourse in Indonesia; and fourth, to make an academic contribution to the study of Islamic psychology and Sufism, particularly in understanding how Sufi values can serve as a foundation for the formation of a strong identity and concept of self amidst the challenges of modernity.

**Research Methodology**

This study was designed using a descriptive qualitative approach with the figure-study method, which explores, understands, and analyzes in depth the thoughts, ideas, and perspectives of a particular figure on specific issues (Kaelan, 2021, p. 43). The research design is analytical-descriptive, meaning that the study not only describes Cak Nun's thoughts superficially but also systematically examines the structure, foundations, and implications of the concept of the self from a Sufi perspective as presented in his works. This approach was chosen because Cak Nun's thoughts are disseminated through various media, including poetry, essays, verses, and the Maiyah discussion forums, thus requiring an analytical framework capable of comprehensively capturing the complexity and depth of his ideas without reducing them to numbers or statistical categorizations.

The subject of this study is Cak Nun, the central figure whose ideas are analyzed in depth. Emha Ainun Najib was chosen as the subject of this study because he is one of Indonesia's Muslim intellectuals and cultural figures who has consistently incorporated Sufi values into every form of his work and thought for more than four decades (Nugroho, 2022, p. 88). Primary data sources in this study Cak Nun's written works, such as books, poetry collections, and essays, including Slilit Sang Kiai, Anggukan Ritmis Kaki Pak Kiai, Titik Nadir Demokrasi, as well as documented transcripts of the Maiyah forums. Secondary data sources include journal articles, theses, dissertations, and books discussing Cak Nun's thought and relevant studies on Sufism, which serve as material for comparison and deeper analysis. The core instrument in this study is the

researcher himself (the human instrument), who functions as the designer, collector, analyst, and reporter of the research results, in accordance with the tradition of qualitative research grounded in literature review (Sugiyono, 2021, p. 66).

The data collection process in this study was conducted in three interconnected stages. The first stage was inventory, which involved identifying and collecting all works and sources related to Cak Nun's thoughts on the concept of self and Sufism. Second, the grouping process, which involved categorizing the data based on key themes related to the research focus, such as the themes of nafs, ma'rifat, fana', and the relationship between humans and God in Cak Nun's works. Third, the verification stage, which involves reviewing the consistency and authenticity of the collected data by referring directly to primary sources to avoid distortions in understanding; precision in reading, recording, and organizing textual data is the key to the success of text-based research (Zed, 2022, p. 80).

Data analysis in this study employs two approaches applied in an integrated manner. First, hermeneutic analysis is a method of text interpretation that seeks to understand the meaning behind linguistic expressions by taking into account the historical, social, and cultural context of the author (Mustaqim, 2021, p. 78). This method is used to interpret Emha Ainun Najib's Sufi expressions, which often appear in symbolic, metaphorical, and poetic forms, so that their meanings can be understood more comprehensively and objectively. Second, thematic analysis involves steps to identify recurring thematic patterns in the textual data to pinpoint the main themes that depict the concept of the self from a Sufi perspective, according to Emha Ainun Najib. These two analytical approaches are carried out iteratively through reading, understanding, comparing, and reflecting until a comprehensive, consistent, and academically accountable understanding is achieved regarding the construction of the Sufi concept of self in Cak Nun's thought.

## Results and Discussion

### Interpretations of the Creation of Humanity According to the Thought of Emha Ainun Najib

The meaning of human creation according to Emha Ainun Najib is inseparable from the theological foundations of Islam, which affirm that humans are unique beings created with a noble and deliberate purpose. Cak Nun often

emphasizes that the presence of humans in this world is not a coincidence, but rather a manifestation of God's boundless will and love. In various Maiyah forums and his works, he explains that the verse "Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un" is not merely a phrase recited at the time of death, but an ontological statement describing the very essence of human existence—that humans originate from Allah and are on a journey back to Him (Rofiq, 2022, p. 33). This interpretation forms the basis for Cak Nun's theocentric Sufi concept of the self, which holds that understanding one's true self is possible only through awareness of the origin and purpose of creation.

Emha Ainun Najib understands the process of human creation through a perspective that uniquely combines cosmological and psychological dimensions. The breathing of the divine spirit (nafkhah ruhiy) into the human body, as described in the Qur'an, Surah Al-Hijr, verse 29, is the most revolutionary moment in the history of creation—an event that makes humanity the only creature intrinsically endowed with divine light. Cak Nun illustrates this with the metaphor of humans as "lamps" containing "divine electricity"; the physical body is merely the shell, while the soul is the true flame (Syamsuddin, 2023, p. 14). Thus, an authentic sense of self cannot be built solely on biological or social aspects but must be grounded in the awareness that the essence of humanity is the light of God undergoing a spiritual process.

**The Concept of Self in Sufism**

According to Emha Ainun Najib's perspective on Sufism, the Sufi study of the human soul is broader and more profound than the concept of self in modern Western psychology. While Western psychology tends to define the concept of self as an individual's perception of themselves, shaped through social interactions and life experiences. According to Cak Nun, the concept of self is a journey toward the most fundamental understanding of who one is before God, for what purpose one was created and lives, and where one is headed (Wahyudi, 2021, p. 89). Cak Nun cites the hadith "Man arafa nafsahu faqad arafa rabbahu" (Whoever knows himself knows his Lord) as the core of the entire framework of self-understanding. In other words, self-understanding is not the ultimate goal, but rather the path toward divine gnosis, which is the pinnacle of a servant's journey.

To attain divine recognition, the Sufi stages of self-awareness, according to Emha Ainun Najib, require understanding the difference between the

inauthentic self (nafs ammarah) and the true self (nafs mutmainnah). The false self is one trapped by desire, ego, ambition, and attachment to the world—a condition Cak Nun often refers to as the "unaware self." Meanwhile, the true self is one that has undergone spiritual purification (tazkiyatun nafs) to perceive reality with spiritual clarity (Muhaimin, 2022, p. 55). This process of transition from an inauthentic identity to a true identity is known in Sufism as suluk, that is, a journey within the self that requires perseverance, humility, and complete surrender to God. This process is not an elite or exclusive matter for the pesantren community, but rather a universal journey that anyone can undertake through mindfulness in daily activities.

**Humans as Servants and Stewards**

According to Cak Nun, the role of humans in this world is divided into two dimensions that are mutually supportive and inseparable. The first dimension is vertical responsibility, namely as servants who are wholly devoted to and obedient to Allah (*ubudiyah*). The second dimension is the horizontal duty, namely to serve as a representative bearing the responsibility for the stewardship and preservation of the earth and all its contents (Nashiruddin, 2021, p. 101). Cak Nun emphasizes that neglecting either of these aspects will result in individuals who are spiritually and socially unbalanced. An individual who emphasizes only the dimension of ubudiyah without understanding khilafah will tend to be passive and avoid social responsibility (Hasan, 2017, p. 282). Mean while, an individual who is involved only in the aspect of khilafah without a strong foundation of worship will easily fall into arrogance and ruin

Cak Nun asserts that human duties cannot be authentically fulfilled without first possessing a proper sense of self. Individuals who do not understand themselves well—who are unaware of their origins, the purpose of their lives, and where their true selves will ultimately return—will live their lives in an automatic and meaningless manner (Rofiq, 2022, p. 35). Cak Nun describes this as "an individual who exists without realizing their origins," that is, an individual who is physically present in the world but has not yet truly been born spiritually. In this regard, according to Cak Nun, Sufism is not merely a matter of rituals or dhikr, but rather a means of cultivating self-awareness structured as a process of becoming a fully human being in the most comprehensive and noble sense.

**Understanding Oneself as a Servant**

One of the most profound aspects of Emha Ainun Najib's thinking regarding the concept of self is his view of the self as a servant (abdun). According to Cak Nun, if one recognizes oneself as a servant, one fully accepts one's limitations, weaknesses, and total dependence on Allah as the Creator. This recognition is not a sign of inferiority or self-deprecation, but rather a liberating awareness, for by acknowledging that one is merely a servant, the individual is freed from the burden of having to be a god unto oneself. Emha often conveys this through a poetic statement: "The more I feel humble before Allah, the more I feel greatness before the world" (Syamsuddin, 2023, p. 15). This statement reflects a profound Sufi paradox: that true sincerity of heart actually yields the undeniable strength and grandeur of the soul.

In the context of self-identification as a servant, Cak Nun places great emphasis on the concept of faqr (spiritual poverty) as one of the highest stations in Sufism. According to Cak Nun, faqr is not about physical poverty, but rather a profound awareness that we truly possess nothing. Everything that humans possess—such as the soul, wealth, knowledge, and talents—is merely a trust from Allah that can be taken away at any time. This awareness of faqr is the antithesis of arrogance and greed, which are the primary causes of the downfall of humanity and civilization (Wahyudi, 2021, p. 90). Thus, by internalizing faqr as part of their identity as a servant, a person will become light-hearted, open-minded, and rich in gratitude in every situation in life.

**The Concept of Self as a Khalifah**

The dimension of stewardship is a crucial element in the formation of self-concept. Recognizing oneself as a steward means understanding that every individual is a representative of God in the world, tasked with advancing, preserving, and upholding justice in every aspect of life. Cak Nun sharply critiques a narrow understanding of stewardship—one that is associated solely with political power or official leadership. For him, every individual—regardless of position, social status, or educational background—is a leader in their own life: a mother is a leader in her family, a farmer is a leader in their fields, an artist is a leader in their cultural sphere (Muhaimin, 2022, p. 60). Therefore, awareness of the caliphate is not limited to exclusivity but is inclusive and universal.

Cak Nun emphasizes that self-awareness as a leader must always go hand in hand with self-awareness as a servant. These two forms of awareness, he

argues, are like the two wings of a bird that must move in balance so that the bird can fly high. A caliph who is not grounded in servitude will become a tyrannical and destructive ruler, as is often seen in the annals of human history. Conversely, someone who is unaware of the khalifah aspect of their being will become a passive, stagnant individual who is of no benefit to those around them (Nashiruddin, 2021, p. 109). It is this integration of both aspects—the awareness of being a servant and a khalifah—that, according to Cak Nun, constitutes the fundamental framework of a whole, healthy, and Islamic self-concept, a concept he refers to as the "perfect human" or "insan kamil" within the Sufi tradition.

**The Relationship Between the Self and Spirituality**

In Cak Nun's view, the relationship between the self and spirituality is not dualistic—where the self is separate from spirituality—but monistic, because spirituality is the deepest core of the self itself. Cak Nun often invites his Maiyah audience to reflect on the question, "Who is experiencing it?" when they feel happiness, sadness, or anxiety (Zuhri, 2023, p. 45). This question is not rhetorical, but an invitation to explore the deepest consciousness, which he calls the "spiritual self"—an aspect of the self that transcends the mind, emotions, and physical body. According to Cak Nun, this dimension is the meeting point between humanity and the divine presence, and recognizing it is the core of the spiritual journey in Sufism.

According to Cak Nun, the connection between the self and spirituality is reflected in his view of dhikr as a means of self-integration. According to Cak Nun, dhikr is not merely the verbal repetition of the names of Allah, but also a process of unifying all dimensions of the self—namely, the mind, emotions, will, and body—into a single frequency of consciousness that is fully directed toward Allah. When dhikr is performed with deep contemplation, the boundary between "I" and "not-I" becomes increasingly clear, and the individual begins to experience what is known in the Sufi tradition as fana'—the dissolution of the ego in the divine presence (Wahyudi, 2021, p. 86). This experience of fana' is the pinnacle of self-realization, for at this point, a person fully realizes that their true self is not the ego that has long been regarded as the self, but rather something far broader, deeper, and more eternal.

Cak Nun has developed the concept of the relationship between the self and the spiritual in the context of social life, which he refers to as social spirituality. Individuals who have attained a deep understanding of the self will

not withdraw from society and become trapped in personal reflection, but will instead become increasingly proactive and creative in confronting social realities with compassion, honesty, and responsibility (Zuhri, 2023, p. 60). The Maiyah Forum is a tangible manifestation of social spirituality—a space for spiritual connection and contemplation where remembrance (dzikir), prayers (shalawat), intellectual discussions, and cultural expressions merge into a cohesive whole. Spirituality is not solely the domain of Sufis who seclude themselves in hermitages; it can and should also be present amidst the busyness of modern human life. Of course, this takes different forms and approaches, as the challenges faced by modern humans—with their complex life issues—involve a range of trials and tests. This differs from the practices of traditional Sufis, who lived in a different era.

**The Contribution of Emha Ainun Najib's Thought**

Overall, the development of the concept of the self from a Sufi perspective, as conceived by Cak Nun, reflects a unique synthesis between classical Sufi traditions and Indonesia's contemporary socio-cultural context. Unlike classical Sufis, who tended to convey Sufi teachings in technical, esoteric language accessible only to the educated elite, Cak Nun transforms Sufi values into simple, poetic language attuned to the challenges of daily life (Muhaimin, 2022, p. 70). The ideas regarding the Sufi concept of self that he proposes are not only significant in academic discourse but also practical as a guide to life for the general public seeking meaning, peace, and a strong sense of identity amid the increasingly powerful currents of modernity.

Cak Nun's intellectual contributions to the development of the Sufi concept of self in Indonesia are of strategic significance and cannot be overlooked. First, he has successfully bridged the gap between the pesantren Sufi tradition and urban communities that yearn for spirituality but are unfamiliar with classical Sufi terminology. Second, he asserts that the concept of self from a Sufi perspective does not conflict with modern rationality; rather, it offers solutions to the crises of identity and meaning that characterize postmodern society. Third, through the Maiyah Forum and his works, he has created a learning community ecosystem that combines self-discovery, spiritual development, and social participation within a single organic and sustainable framework. Therefore, Cak Nun's ideas deserve a special place on the map of modern Indonesian Sufi thought.

## Conclusion

The thought of Emha Ainun Najib, affectionately known as Cak Nun, can be summarized as follows: the concept of the self is an original synthesis that successfully reconstructs the classical Sufi tradition within the socio-cultural context of contemporary Indonesia. Through a theocentric approach rooted in the principle of tazkiyatun nafs, Cak Nun positions self-knowledge not merely as a personal spiritual achievement, but as a dialectical integration between human existential consciousness as a servant ('abd) and one's functional responsibility as a khalifah. The transformation of esoteric Sufi language into an inclusive cultural narrative allows these spiritual values to remain relevant and operational for urban communities as they face identity disruptions in the modern era.

Furthermore, the significant contribution of this line of thought lies in the development of the "social spirituality" paradigm, which asserts that the maturation of the Sufi self-concept must lead to active and creative social engagement. By bridging the gap between traditional asceticism and the realities of postmodern life, the self-concept proposed here offers a paradigmatic solution to the crisis of meaning and spiritual aridity. Theoretically, this finding enriches the discourse on Islamic psychology and community development by offering a solid foundation of identity, in which strengthening the ontological dimension of humanity becomes the key to realizing a more civilized way of life.

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