Ṣūfī Networks and Urban Transformation in Sudan through Education and Social Integration

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Abstract

Challenging conventional narratives of militarized Islamic expansion, this study investigates the instrumental role of Ṣūfī institutions in Sudan's peaceful and integrative Islamization. It establishes the significance of these institutions not merely as spiritual centers but as foundational frameworks for social cohesion and community resilience, particularly in response to contemporary crises. Focusing on the peaceful spread of Islam, the research examines how Ṣūfī orders utilized non-coercive mechanisms, including migration, trade, and spiritual mediation, to embed Islamic practices within syncretic societies. Employing institutional ethnography, the methodology reveals the socio-political functions of Ṣūfī centers such as the Masīd and Khalwa. Results demonstrate that these institutions transcended doctrinal roles, becoming engines of urbanization, de-tribalization, and grassroots governance. The research particularly emphasizes the educational, conflict-resolution, and humanitarian contributions of Ṣūfī networks, especially during crises like the April 15, 2023, war. Case studies highlight how spiritual leaders provided shelter, healthcare, and psychological support, reinforcing the Masīd as a moral and communal nucleus. This integrative role underscores the adaptability of Ṣūfīsm in responding to changing social dynamics, offering an enduring model of inclusive governance and interethnic solidarity. The findings contribute to academic discussions on religion and social order, illustrating how faith-based institutions can serve as resilient frameworks for community development in fragile states.

INTRODUCTION

The spread of Islam in Sudan presents a unique historical case marked by peaceful coexistence, gradual integration, and deep cultural assimilation. Contrary to the often militarized narratives surrounding Islamic expansion, Sudan's Islamization unfolded through diplomatic, spiritual, and social mechanisms, of which the Ṣūfī orders were the cornerstone. Central to this historical trajectory is the Treaty of Al-Baqat, a rarely highlighted yet profoundly influential accord that laid the foundation for religious exchange and mutual respect between early Muslims and Nubian societies. The treaty echoes the spirit of the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah in early Islamic history, promoting peaceful coexistence and religious dialogue (Farman & Yucel, 2023; Hamidi, 2025). As Özkan (2024) suggests that such frameworks of peace contributed significantly to the non-coercive dissemination of Islamic teachings in culturally diverse environments.

The religio-cultural landscape of Sudan is not monolithic; rather, it is a vibrant mosaic of tribal affiliations, spiritual traditions, and theological orientations. Within this dynamic context, two main paradigms of Islamic practice have emerged—Ṣūfī Islam and political Islam—each with distinct implications for society. Ṣūfīsm centers on inner spirituality, ritual devotion, and communal harmony, frequently accommodating and integrating indigenous customs. In contrast, political Islam tends to emphasize jurisprudential orthodoxy and institutional power, often to enforce sharia-based governance. This dichotomy, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, has often played out as a tension between inclusive spiritual pluralism and rigid legal formalism (Ali, 2016; Janson, 2022).

While political Islam has occasionally led to sectarian friction, Ṣūfīsm has enabled a more harmonious synthesis between Islamic doctrine and local sociocultural realities.

Throughout North and Sub-Saharan Africa, Ṣūfīsm has historically functioned as a bridge between Islam and indigenous traditions. Rather than confronting local belief systems, Ṣūfī scholars and practitioners engaged in cultural accommodation, drawing upon spiritual commonalities and integrating rituals that resonated with pre-Islamic customs. As noted by Sharkey (2000) and Adam (2022)This approach not only eased the religious transition but also fostered intercommunal harmony. Orders such as the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya exemplified this adaptive model, disseminating Islamic values through educational institutions, oral traditions, and the development of vernacular religious literature (Nurainiah, 2022; عليش, 2023). These spiritual networks expanded literacy and advanced Islamic scholarship in vernacular languages, thus embedding Islam within the cultural fabric of local societies.

In Sudan specifically, the roots of Ṣūfīsm run deep, tracing back to the rise of early Islamic kingdoms. These polities served as nodal points for trade, migration, and religious transformation, facilitating a blending of Islamic and local norms (علي, 2021). Through engagement with social and economic life, Ṣūfī leaders became spiritual and temporal authorities. This integration fostered a gradual and organic Islamization process, markedly different from the forceful or politicized conversions seen elsewhere. According to Berridge (2021) The success of Ṣūfīsm in Sudan lies in its ability to resonate with communal values such as hospitality, kinship, and egalitarianism.

The socio-political history of Sudan further reflects the evolving interaction between religious authority and governance. For instance, the case of Hassan al-Turabi epitomizes the complex entanglement of religious ideology and statecraft. Al-Turabi's fusion of traditionalism with elements of political Islam engendered both support and controversy, highlighting the persistent tension between reformist and puritanical currents in Sudanese Islam (Ali, 2016; Maram et al., 2024; Ridley, 2014). His trajectory serves as a lens into the broader ideological contestation between inclusive Ṣūfī traditions and exclusionary legalism, a struggle still visible in Sudan's contemporary political discourse.

An important historical model that further clarifies this dynamic is the Funj Sultanate (1504–1821), which institutionalized Islamic principles while preserving a broad degree of cultural pluralism. The Funj adopted Islamic tenets in administration and jurisprudence, yet allowed for significant retention of local customs (Sharkey, 2000; Wasserstein & Ayalon, 2013). The synthesis of Islamic governance and ethnic plurality provided a sustainable model for coexistence, enabling various communities to identify with Islam without relinquishing their ancestral heritage.

One of the most enduring legacies of Ṣūfīsm in Sudan has been its emphasis on building robust social networks. These networks, centered around Masīds, Khalwas, and shrines, offered religious guidance, humanitarian assistance, and conflict mediation. As Mantzikos (2010) and Nurainiah (2022) observations served as early models of civil society, fostering communal trust and spiritual democracy. In this paradigm, religious participation was less about dogmatic conformity and more about spiritual practice, social service, and mutual respect.

This form of Islam, based on cultural integration rather than cultural domination, gave rise to rich syncretic traditions. Sudanese society, shaped by interactions between Islam and local customs, has produced religious expressions that are both orthodox and adaptive. This dynamic process of synthesis has endowed Sudan with a unique Islamic identity—one characterized by poetic devotion (*madīḥ*), ritual dances (*dhikr*), and inclusive community practices (عليش, 2023). Rather than erasing local traditions, Ṣūfīsm in Sudan has elevated them, creating a religious experience that is both authentically Islamic and deeply Sudanese.

The role of Ṣūfīsm in Sudanese education further cements its influence in shaping societal values. From Qur'anic schools to informal study circles, Ṣūfī institutions have historically promoted a literate and reflective Muslim citizenry. Educational initiatives spearheaded by Ṣūfī orders contributed to religious instruction, moral development, and civic engagement (Nurainiah, 2022; Said et al., 2025). These institutions often operated independently of state control, preserving their

legitimacy among the populace and ensuring intergenerational transmission of Ṣūfī ethics and knowledge.

Economically and socially, Ṣūfī orders in Sudan provided critical support systems for marginalized groups, especially during times of famine, war, or colonial disruption. Historical records show that these communities offered shelter to fugitives, food to the poor, and emotional support to the disenfranchised (Hamidi, 2025; Seri-Hersch, 2009). Their holistic approach to religious practice—encompassing spiritual guidance, social welfare, and moral education—has made Ṣūfīsm one of the most enduring forces in Sudanese society.

However, in recent decades, the rise of politicized Islamic movements has posed challenges to the dominance of traditional Ṣūfī orders. Political Islam's emphasis on legal conformity, doctrinal purity, and centralized authority often clashes with the flexible, decentralized ethos of Ṣūfīsm (Janson, 2022; Muhammad Jusuf Nur Ikhsan & Imam, 2025). This tension is especially evident in post-colonial governance structures, where efforts to implement uniform Islamic laws have sometimes marginalized the pluralistic and localized expressions of faith fostered by Ṣūfī orders.

To understand the enduring role of Ṣūfīsm in Sudan's Islamization, scholars have employed a range of theoretical frameworks. These include anthropological approaches that treat Ṣūfī orders as social institutions facilitating cohesion (Habib et al., 2005) and social representation theory that explores how Ṣūfī ethics shape community norms (Zenrif et al., 2024). Others rely on historical-textual analysis to trace the transmission of Ṣūfī values through generations and across geographical boundaries (Latif, 2024; Özköse, 2021). The comparison between Ṣūfī orders and Islamic jurists is particularly revealing: whereas jurists emphasize legalism, Ṣūfī leaders focus on relational spirituality, fostering inclusivity and social trust (Sharief, 2020).

This study positions itself within these academic discussions by examining how Ṣūfī orders contributed not only to the spiritual but also to the social and political Islamization of Sudan. It contends that the success of Ṣūfīsm lies in its adaptability, alignment with local values, and commitment to community welfare. The research further argues that the historical trajectory of Sudanese Islam, rooted in treaties, not battles; in brotherhoods, not bureaucracies, demonstrates the potency of religious integration over religious imposition.

This study positions itself within these academic discussions by advancing three distinct arguments. First, it conceptualizes Sudan's Islamization not merely as a theological conversion but as a socio-economic and urbanizing process driven by Ṣūfī institutions functioning as self-sufficient community hubs. Second, it posits that the resilience of Sudanese Ṣūfīsm stems from a flexible, community-based moral authority that has historically served as a more effective counterweight to rigid, state-enforced legalism. Finally, and most significantly, it frames the Masīd not as a historical relic but as a dynamic and adaptive infrastructure for humanitarian crisis response. The 2023 war serves as a contemporary empirical case to demonstrate that this Ṣūfī model of governance remains functional and vital when state institutions collapse. The research contends that the success of Ṣūfīsm lies in its adaptability, alignment with local values, and commitment to community welfare. The historical trajectory of Sudanese Islam, rooted in treaties, not battles; in brotherhoods, not bureaucracies, demonstrates the potency of religious integration over religious imposition.

Therefore, the objective of this article is to analyze how Ṣūfī institutions have functioned as primary agents in Sudan's peaceful Islamization and the subsequent formation of social cohesion. To achieve this, the research will first examine the non-coercive mechanisms that facilitated the spread of Islam. It will then analyze the multifaceted role of the Masīd in mediating conflict and fostering social integration that transcends tribal and class divisions. Finally, using the April 15, 2023, war as a case study, it will demonstrate the resilience and critical humanitarian function of Ṣūfī institutions in a modern crisis context. Through this analysis, the article argues that the Ṣūfī model of spiritual governance offers a sustainable framework for community development and stability in fragile states. This investigation reasserts the significance of spiritual institutions in shaping national identity and civic harmony, especially in societies marked by ethnic, cultural, and political complexity.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative documentary analysis, a methodology necessitated by the researcher's geographical location in Indonesia and the impossibility of conducting direct fieldwork in Sudan during the active conflict that commenced on April 15, 2023. This approach facilitates a critical, in-depth analysis of key textual sources documenting the crisis. The research focuses specifically on the documented activities of prominent Ṣūfī orders in Sudan, primarily the Qadiriyya, Tijaniyya, and the Sammaniyya tareqas, as their responses are detailed in the source materials.

The foundational data source for this research is the primary report, *Rū'yat al-Ṣūfiyya li-Ḥarb 15 Abril* (A Ṣūfī Vision of the April 15 War). This document, containing firsthand testimonials and narrative case studies from within the Ṣūfī community, is treated as the central text for analysis. The specific accounts of institutional actions, such as those at the Masīd of Sheikh al-Sammani al-Bakri, are drawn directly from this report.

To validate the researcher's interpretation of this primary text, clarify ambiguities, and gain deeper contextual insight, a semi-structured, in-depth remote interview was conducted with the author of the *Rū'yat al-Ṣūfiyya* report, who is a Sudanese academic and university lecturer residing in Saudi Arabia. This key informant interview was instrumental in understanding the compilation process of the testimonies and the nuances of the events described.

Further triangulation was conducted by systematically cross-referencing information with secondary sources covering the period from April to August 2023. These sources, drawn from both reputable international news agencies and independent Sudanese media, were primarily used to verify the broader context and timeline of events, as the specific operational details of the Ṣūfī-led humanitarian actions were unique to the primary report and the author's interview.

The analytical method employed was thematic analysis. Data from all sources were meticulously coded to identify recurring patterns. These codes were then synthesized into the broader themes presented in the Results and Discussion section. The study's primary limitation is the absence of direct ethnographic observation; therefore, its findings represent a critically triangulated analysis of the documented and author-clarified representation of events.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Peaceful Islamization and Cultural Integration

The spread of Islam in Sudan is a compelling example of non-coercive religious expansion shaped by the gradualism and spiritual depth of Ṣūfīsm. Unlike in many regions where Islam expanded through conquest or state-driven orthodoxy, in Sudan, the process was facilitated mainly by Ṣūfī orders whose methods emphasized adaptation, mediation, and lived spirituality. This peaceful Islamization was made possible through multiple interrelated mechanisms, the most fundamental being migration, trade, and the establishment of religious institutions rooted in the local social fabric.

Muslim traders, scholars, and Ṣūfī missionaries migrated into Sudan and introduced Islam through everyday interactions and commercial exchanges rather than imposing religious change. These figures lived among indigenous communities, built trust over time, and engaged in cultural sharing that allowed Islamic teachings to be assimilated naturally (Sharief, 2020; Sukdaven & Bagheri, 2018). The credibility and influence of Ṣūfīsm grew not from political power but from personal integrity, hospitality, and the ability to provide spiritual meaning within familiar cultural frameworks.

Central to this process was the establishment of Ṣūfī institutions such as zawiyas and khalwa schools. Orders like Qadiriyya and Shadhili founded lodges that functioned as centers of religious instruction and as spaces for social care, dispute mediation, and community gathering (Özköse, 2021). These institutions became integral to community life and often replaced or redefined previous religious and social authorities. Their ability to respond to local needs, providing

education, hospitality, and security, allowed them to shape the religious landscape without reliance on coercion or exclusion.

One of the most enduring impacts of this mode of Islamization is the cultural assimilation of Islamic beliefs into pre-existing traditions. Islam in Sudan did not eradicate local customs but adapted and spiritualized them. The continuity of indigenous practices, such as the veneration of saints through qubba shrines or the preservation of oral traditions in khalwa schools, demonstrates how Ṣūfīsm enabled a fusion of the sacred and the local (Soghayroun, 2021). In this way, Islam became culturally embedded rather than superimposed.

This adaptability is also evident in the emphasis Ṣūfīsm places on personal example and spiritual guidance. Sheikhs and dervishes, often traveling on foot, offered spiritual counsel and mediated disputes, embodying humility and moral authority. Their accessible and flexible approach resonated with a population whose spiritual needs were closely tied to daily life and communal harmony (Özköse, 2021). In contrast to juristic models of Islam that emphasized legalistic rigor, the Ṣūfī path was affective, experiential, and community-based.

The gradual nature of this spread, referred to by scholars as stepwise integration, allowed for the blending of Islamic and indigenous beliefs across generations. Instead of replacing traditional cosmologies with abrupt dogmatic shifts, Ṣūfī orders slowly introduced new rituals and values through spiritual training and community involvement. This fostered acceptance of Islamic teachings and created a unique Sudanese Islamic identity that was inclusive, syncretic, and culturally resonant (Sukdaven & Bagheri, 2018; Soghayroun, 2021).

Ṣūfīsm's tolerance-based approach protected against extremist ideologies, instilling a culture of pluralism and coexistence in Sudanese Islam. Through teachings that emphasized love, compassion, and patience, Ṣūfī leaders nurtured social cohesion and a sense of belonging that transcended tribal, ethnic, and sectarian divisions (Sharief, 2020). This was theological and practical, as these orders actively promoted shared rituals, inclusive worship, and communal service projects.

The role of Ṣūfī institutions in fostering religious identity was also shaped by their position as mediators of cultural integration. Their willingness to engage local customs, rather than condemn them, allowed for religious transformation without cultural alienation. For instance, musical expression, poetry, and communal celebrations flourished under the banner of Islamic spirituality, enriching both religious and cultural life. This organic transformation gave rise to a model of Islam deeply intertwined with Sudanese heritage.

Historical case studies further demonstrate the significance of Ṣūfī orders in shaping Sudan's Islamization. For example, establishing zawiyas in rural areas often became the nucleus for village life, serving as educational centers, arbitration spaces, and safe havens. These functions illustrate how Ṣūfī institutions served not merely religious ends but were also engines of social development and civic integration (Maruyama, 2011). Such integration was sustainable because it was not imposed from above, but grew from within communities.

In societies where spiritual worldviews were central to collective identity, Ṣūfīsm provided a natural extension of pre-Islamic beliefs rather than a rupture. The mystical orientation of many Ṣūfī teachings, focusing on the soul's journey to God, the importance of moral character, and the role of remembrance (*dhikr*) resonated with indigenous ontologies, offering familiarity within a new religious paradigm. This allowed Islam to flourish without confrontation and ensured its endurance through intergenerational practice and cultural legitimacy.

The peaceful spread of Islam in Sudan through Ṣūfīsm cannot be understood as a mere historical coincidence, but rather as the result of intentional strategies rooted in compassion, accommodation, and pedagogy. The Ṣūfī model of Islamization, via migration, zawiya-based education, spiritual guidance, and cultural synthesis, fostered a resilient and inclusive Islamic identity. This integrative approach enabled Islam to adapt to local contexts while providing a spiritual framework that inspired individual piety and communal solidarity. As a result, the legacy

of Ṣūfīsm in Sudan is not simply spiritual, but deeply woven into the nation's historical, cultural, and political fabric.

Institutional Role of the Masīd

In the historical and social landscape of Sudan, the Masīd has emerged as one of the most enduring and multifaceted institutions linked to the development and sustainability of Ṣūfīsm. More than a place of worship, the Masīd is a center for spiritual practice, education, social mediation, and community welfare. Its continued relevance in Sudanese Islamic life stems from its ability to integrate religious teachings with community governance, offering a localized form of moral and civic leadership that has historically counterbalanced the state's authority.

The Masīd is a hub where religious instruction, ethical discussion, and communal rituals converge. Rooted in Ṣūfī values of tolerance, compassion, and humility, these spaces become sites where people engage in introspective spiritual growth while simultaneously navigating civic responsibilities. Scholars have identified this as a form of "moral authority" wherein Ṣūfī leaders derive influence not from legal enforcement, but from personal integrity and cultural legitimacy (Valdinoci, 2014). Regular gatherings, Qur'anic lessons, and moral debates within the Masīd not only strengthen religious identity but also promote civic consciousness and societal cohesion (Rahmah et al., 2024).

Historically, the Masīd has played a pivotal role in dispute resolution. In a society often marked by ethnic and regional divisions, Ṣūfī sheikhs mediated conflicts by invoking principles rooted in Islamic mercy and social harmony. This form of conflict mediation—non-institutional but deeply respected—has helped de-escalate tensions and restore community trust in times of crisis (Hermansen, 2023). The participatory nature of this process, often involving community elders and multiple stakeholders, demonstrates Masīd's role as a democratic space within a spiritual framework.

Moreover, as Sudanese society became more ethnically and socially complex, the adaptability of the Masīd proved essential. The values imparted within its walls—pluralism, coexistence, and mutual respect—enabled it to remain a vital space for intercultural dialogue and inclusion (Hermansen, 2023). In this way, the Masīd transcended its initial religious function to become a cornerstone of social resilience, particularly in multi-ethnic contexts where formal political institutions often faltered.

The educational mission of the Masīd further solidifies its role as a transformative institution. Far from being limited to religious dogma, education in the Masīd includes literacy, ethics, and community responsibilities. Such training equips individuals with the intellectual and moral tools necessary for navigating both spiritual and worldly obligations (Абылов & Zholdassuly, 2023). In doing so, the Masīd nurtures citizens who are not only devout but also socially responsible, reinforcing stability and long-term communal development.

Importantly, the Masīd has historically responded to the socio-economic needs of its surroundings. Whether through organizing food distribution during famine or initiating schools and cooperative ventures, the institution frequently filled gaps left by formal governance (Valdinoci, 2014). These interventions often go beyond charity; they symbolize the Masīd's status as a bastion of mutual aid and community-led development. As state authority waxed and waned, especially during colonial and postcolonial periods, it was often the Masīd—not government institutions—that maintained continuity and coherence in people's lives.

The Masīd also functions as a crisis response unit. In times of political instability, economic collapse, or natural disaster, Ṣūfī institutions have mobilized their networks to deliver humanitarian assistance (Afi, 2025). This responsiveness has only deepened public trust in their leadership, reinforcing their legitimacy as alternative authority structures (Hermansen, 2023). Their presence as spiritual sanctuaries and operational centers for relief underlines their versatility and embeddedness in Sudanese society.

Masīd's ability to harmonize tradition with evolving realities makes it uniquely resilient. As Sudan undergoes rapid changes—shifts in political power, globalization, and ideological contestation—the Masīd remains a space where communities interpret these transformations through a spiritual lens. Its leadership, rooted in Ṣūfī ethics rather than political ambition, allows it to navigate these shifts while maintaining social cohesion. The Masīd's longevity reflects its deep entrenchment in the social memory and functional structure of Sudanese Islam.

The Masīd exemplifies how a religious institution can transcend the boundaries of worship and doctrine to become a stabilizing agent of governance, conflict resolution, and cultural continuity. Its embeddedness in the everyday lives of people, through education, mediation, and service, makes it not only a spiritual institution but also a civic one. In the Sudanese context, where formal institutions have often struggled to unite diverse communities, the Masīd continues to stand as a living testament to the integrative and adaptive power of Ṣūfīsm.

Overcoming Tribal and Class Divides

The transformative role of Ṣūfī networks in Sudan is particularly evident in their ability to mediate social divides rooted in tribal affiliation and class hierarchy. In a nation where tribal identity has long been a primary axis of social organization, often leading to exclusionary practices and fragmented community relations, the rise of Ṣūfīsm has offered an alternative framework for unity based on shared spiritual experience and moral values. Through mechanisms grounded in spiritual allegiance, communal interaction, and inclusive pedagogy, Ṣūfī institutions have successfully mitigated social divisions and fostered a more cohesive Sudanese identity.

At the heart of this transformation is the Masīd, a Ṣūfī communal space that transcends its religious function to serve as a neutral and inclusive arena for social interaction. In these spaces, daily rituals and collective worship break down barriers that might otherwise be defined by ethnic or economic difference. The Masīd facilitates regular encounters across tribal lines, creating familiarity and mutual respect among individuals who may belong to historically opposed groups. This participatory environment builds social capital, replacing exclusivist tribal affiliations with shared religious purpose (Rahmah et al., 2024). As such, the Masīd is not merely a house of prayer but a civic forum for social reconciliation.

One of the most potent tools deployed by Ṣūfī orders in this regard is the concept of spiritual allegiance, unlike tribal loyalty, which is often inherited and rigid, spiritual allegiance is voluntarily assumed and centered on personal devotion to a sheikh and a path of ethical refinement. This allegiance binds followers through spiritual brotherhood rather than bloodline, fostering horizontal relationships that blur distinctions of tribe and class. Within Ṣūfī communities, disciples from different economic backgrounds and ethnic groups engage in shared rituals, study circles, and service projects, creating a spiritually bonded identity that often supersedes prior loyalties (Hermansen, 2023). This is particularly effective in rural areas where Ṣūfī orders provide spiritual guidance and social leadership in the absence of state infrastructure.

Ṣūfī leaders strengthen this cohesion by actively mediating social disputes and encouraging a culture of forgiveness, patience, and dialogue. Rooted in Islamic ethics and Ṣūfī virtues, these conflict resolution practices de-emphasize punitive measures in favor of reconciliation and mutual understanding (Valdinoci, 2014). In a society marked by recurring communal tensions, such mediation efforts are spiritually significant and politically stabilizing. They create trusted pathways for justice and harmony, often achieving what formal state institutions fail to deliver. Community reliance on these non-coercive forms of governance further deepens the role of Ṣūfī orders as pillars of social authority and unity (Hermansen, 2023).

Education has also proven instrumental in bridging tribal and class divides. Ṣūfī institutions have long invested in grassroots educational programs that promote religious literacy, moral development, communal responsibility, and appreciation of diversity. Unlike elite Islamic jurisprudence schools, which may cater to a limited class, the educational outreach of Ṣūfī orders is inclusive by design. These schools empower individuals with tools for self-betterment and societal

contribution, challenging tribal and class hierarchies by emphasizing merit, piety, and service (Абылов & Zholdassuly, 2023). The curriculum often integrates local cultural expressions with Islamic teachings, allowing for identity formation that is both rooted and transcendent.

The process of identity construction within Ṣūfī frameworks is gradual and deeply personal. This stepwise spiritual integration allows individuals from syncretic or pre-Islamic backgrounds to retain cultural elements while embracing Islamic spirituality. Rather than demanding abrupt rejection of indigenous beliefs, Ṣūfī teachings create a continuum in which traditional values are reframed in spiritual language. This model not only prevents cultural alienation but also reinforces a shared moral compass that brings together disparate segments of society (Абылов & Zholdassuly, 2023). The resulting religious identity is neither homogenizing nor exclusive; it celebrates difference within unity.

In regions destabilized by conflict and socio-economic disparity, the inclusive ethos of Ṣūfī networks provides an anchor of belonging and moral orientation. These networks cultivate what might be termed "spiritual citizenship," a form of belonging based not on lineage or wealth, but on participation in a community of ethical and religious practice. Such an approach is critical in Sudan's postcolonial reality, where national identity remains contested and fragmented. By emphasizing mercy, solidarity, and collective responsibility, Ṣūfī institutions offer a viable path toward peace and integration (Rahmah et al., 2024).

The success of Ṣūfī networks in overcoming tribal and class divides lies in their capacity to redefine social boundaries through shared spiritual values. Their embeddedness in everyday life, from the Masīd to the school, from the prayer gathering to the conflict mediation circle, enables Ṣūfīsm to act as a glue that binds communities otherwise separated by ethnicity or wealth. Their teachings do not simply instruct; they transform the moral landscape, creating a common ground upon which a new Sudanese identity can be negotiated.

Transmission through Education and Communal Practice

The transmission of Islamic values and communal cohesion in Sudan has been profoundly shaped by the educational and civic roles played by Ṣūfī institutions. Historically, Ṣūfī leaders were spiritual guides and architects of urban formation and social transformation. By establishing masīds and zawiyas, these leaders cultivated towns and cities as religious and socio-economic centers, reinforcing Islamic teachings through structured education and inclusive civic practices. Their dual role as educators and community organizers enabled the peaceful spread of Islam and the consolidation of communal identity in Sudan's evolving urban landscape.

One of the most significant contributions of Ṣūfī leadership has been the development of educational infrastructures that attracted populations and promoted social mobility. The masīd, functioning as both a mosque and an educational center, became a hub of spiritual instruction, literacy, and communal activity. These institutions provided regular teachings not only in religious jurisprudence but also in ethics, history, and practical knowledge, making them accessible to both elites and marginalized groups (Ibrahim et al., 2017). The appeal of such institutions drew migrants from rural areas, contributing to the transformation of villages into structured urban settlements. The integration of communal prayer, learning, and social deliberation under one roof cultivated a shared identity among diverse community members, laying the foundation for stable urban societies.

The Khalwa system further demonstrates the centrality of education in this process. After the spread of Islam in northern and central Sudan during the 16th century, the Khalwa became a traditional Islamic school model with no age limits for enrollment, fostering wide access to religious learning (Habib et al., 2005).

Figure 1. Students Engaged in Qur'anic Study at a Khalwa in Sudan, Demonstrating the
Traditional Method of Learning Centered on Wooden Tablets (*Lauḥ*).
Source: Al Jazeera (2018)

Khalawi, as an integrated educational institution linked to Ṣūfīsm, transcended tribal and regional boundaries, attracting students from all over Sudan and neighboring countries (Muhammad Saad, 2021). Their focus on Qur'anic preservation, literacy, and moral instruction made them vital instruments in Sudanese society's spiritual and civic development.

Ṣūfī networks also facilitated urbanization by filling governance gaps and offering alternative authority structures in regions where weak or fragmented state institutions. Ṣūfī leaders acted as de facto administrators, resolving disputes, organizing labor, and providing welfare services. Their spiritual legitimacy allowed them to command respect across ethnic and class lines, reinforcing social order while avoiding coercion (Steel et al., 2019). Towns such as Omdurman and Khartoum illustrate this pattern, where Ṣūfī leadership not only helped shape city planning and educational agendas but also informed policy discussions grounded in Islamic ethical norms (Ibrahim et al., 2017).

Moreover, the Khalwa, closely tied to Ṣūfī orders, fulfilled educational but also social and humanitarian roles. They acted as sanctuaries for travelers and displaced persons, venues for dispute resolution, and centers for medical treatment and psychological care (El Sammani et al., 1985). The leaders of Khalawi, known as faqīs, often addressed the community's material and spiritual needs, providing social security and promoting holistic well-being (Pruess, 1983). These services complemented the institutions' educational missions, ensuring that students and community members experienced a supportive environment grounded in Ṣūfī ethics and solidarity.

The reciprocal relationship between Ṣūfī religious centers and socio-economic growth is further illustrated by their promotion of commerce and vocational training. By initiating trade activities, supporting local markets, and encouraging skill development, these institutions cultivated economic vitality within urban areas. Educational programs were often coupled with practical training, providing students with the tools necessary to participate actively in local economies. Such efforts were particularly transformative for youth and women, who accessed education and economic resources through Ṣūfī centers that championed community empowerment and equity (Ibrahim & Zulu, 2014).

In parallel, spiritual allegiance within Ṣūfīsm contributed to a reshaping of social identities in urban contexts. As individuals committed themselves to particular Ṣūfī orders, they entered into ethical and spiritual communities that transcended tribal lineage or socioeconomic class. This redefinition of identity, anchored in shared spiritual experience, helped unify diverse populations under a collective vision of Islamic moral life. The emphasis on piety, discipline, and community service became a common cultural currency, fostering an urban ethos grounded in both religious devotion and civic responsibility (Steel et al., 2019).

Furthermore, Ṣūfī orders proved adept at reconciling local customs with Islamic teachings. Their flexible approach to religious practice allowed for the preservation of indigenous cultural expressions within an Islamic framework, promoting inclusivity and cross-cultural dialogue. In this way, Ṣūfī leaders helped integrate rural migrants into urban life without alienating their cultural heritage. The resultant urban cultures were neither wholly traditional nor strictly doctrinaire but somewhat hybrid spaces where religious and local values coexisted harmoniously.

Importantly, Ṣūfī institutions acted as sanctuaries during periods of political instability, offering protection and continuity to displaced populations. Their existing networks facilitated the flow of people, resources, and knowledge, allowing urban centers to absorb rural populations without the breakdown of social order. These patterns of transformation were especially critical during colonial and postcolonial upheavals, as Ṣūfī orders offered moral guidance and logistical support to those navigating the challenges of displacement, poverty, and identity reformation (Ahmed et al., n.d.; O'Brien, 1990).

In economic terms, the strategic positioning of masīds near trade routes and markets amplified their role as economic catalysts. Ṣūfī leaders frequently supported local entrepreneurs, organized waqf (charitable endowments), and coordinated agricultural and artisanal labor. These activities sustained the Ṣūfī institutions and revitalized surrounding communities, enabling towns to flourish around them. The rise of commercial districts adjacent to religious centers became a common feature in cities influenced by Ṣūfīsm, reflecting the synergy between spiritual life and material prosperity (Ibrahim & Zulu, 2014).

These institutions' cultural and intellectual outputs helped shape urban identity. From poetry and music to public sermons and legal arbitration, Ṣūfī institutions fostered vibrant civic cultures grounded in Islamic aesthetics and moral philosophy. The resulting urban character was not merely a product of demographic expansion but a reflection of a value system that emphasized compassion, discipline, collective well-being, and spiritual awareness. This legacy continues to inform Sudanese urban life, where the imprint of Ṣūfī teachings remains visible in both the built environment and the rhythm of communal life (Ibrahim et al., 2017).

The transmission of Islamic principles in Sudan through Ṣūfī education and communal practice has profoundly shaped the nation's urban transformation. Through institutions that combined worship, pedagogy, and social governance, Ṣūfī leaders facilitated a unique model of urbanization—one in which spiritual values and civic responsibilities coalesce to promote inclusive growth, cultural integration, and societal stability. This process underscores the enduring relevance of Ṣūfīsm not only as a religious movement but also as a force for developmental change across Islamic Africa.

Resilience and Humanitarian Role of the Masīd during Crisis

In the face of socio-political upheaval and the collapse of state infrastructure during the April 15, 2023 war in Sudan, the Ṣūfī Masīd emerged as a resilient institution, providing indispensable humanitarian services and restoring social cohesion. The resilience of the Masīd was not accidental but deeply rooted in its historical and spiritual functions. As detailed in *Rū'yat al-Ṣūfiyya li al-Ḥarb 15 Abril*, the Masīd has long stood as a symbol of Ṣūfī moral authority—offering education, arbitration, shelter, and spiritual solace in times of communal crisis.

The *Rū'yat al-Ṣūfiyya li-Ḥarb 15 Abril* articulates the indispensable humanitarian role of Ṣūfī institutions during the conflict. This documented response must be situated within the catastrophic collapse of state services in Khartoum and Omdurman, as consistently reported by international and independent Sudanese media from April to August 2023. News accounts from sources such as Al Jazeera (2023) and Yale School of Public Health highlighted the complete cessation of state healthcare, food distribution, and security, forcing civilians to rely entirely on emergent local initiatives (Poole, 2024). This created a critical humanitarian vacuum, wherein the organized efforts of communal networks became essential for survival. It is within this dire context that the Masīd's

documented functions as a refuge, health center, and communal anchor gain significant interpretive weight.

While the *Rū'yat al-Ṣūfiyya* documents the significant humanitarian contributions of Ṣūfī institutions, broader media coverage frequently emphasizes the crucial role of Sudanese Resistance Committees in grassroots aid provision. Reports from The New Humanitarian and other independent sources illustrate Resistance Committees operating as highly coordinated, neighborhood-based networks, focusing on evacuating civilians, establishing emergency kitchens, and providing medical aid in conflict zones (Nasir et al., 2023; Olson et al., 2024). Their legitimacy stemmed from civic engagement and a strict non-affiliation with the warring parties, advocating for civilian protection over political agendas. This suggests a complementary division of labor where Ṣūfī institutions, particularly Masīds, likely focused on deep-seated communal care, spiritual solace, and basic sustenance for their immediate followers and the displaced. At the same time, Resistance Committees addressed wider logistical and emergency response needs across broader urban areas.

Table 1. Documented Humanitarian Contributions of Ṣūfī Institutions during the April 15, 2023 Conflict

Ṣūfī Order / Institution	Location	Key Documented Contributions		Data Source (as per Methodology)
Masīd of Sheikh al-Sammani al-Bakri (Sammaniyya Order)	Omaidan	-	Provided shelter, food, and emotional support for large numbers of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).	*Rū'yat al-Ṣūfiyya* report (accounts of Hanan al-Misbah and Omar Mohammed al-Amin); Validated by author interview.
		-	Operated a 24-hour medical center with volunteer doctors. - Organized communal rituals and events (e.g., marriages) to restore morale and social structure.	
Masīd of Sheikh al-Yaqout	Khartoum	-	Maintained a neutral humanitarian stance amidst political fragmentation. Continued food distribution and spiritual counseling despite direct threats and infrastructural damage. - Remained in the conflict zone to protect the local community.	*Rū'yat al-Ṣūfiyya* report (account of Muhammad Al-Fateh Hayati); Supported by secondary news reports on faith-based aid.
Masīd of Sheikh Abdul Rahim al-Rukayni	Khartoum	-	Coordinated with other neutral leaders to provide essential aid.	*Rū'yat al-Ṣūfiyya* report (account of Muhammad Al-Fateh Hayati).
		-	Served as a stabilizing force by refusing to take political sides.	
		-	Maintained the continuity of communal and religious life despite surrounding violence.	

It is important to acknowledge that specific mentions of the Masīd of Sheikh al-Sammani al-Bakri in Omaidan or individual Ṣūfī leaders such as Sheikh al-Yaqout in international news and humanitarian reports were limited during the April-August 2023 period. This absence does not necessarily negate their activities. However, it may reflect the localized and often informal nature of Ṣūfī aid networks, which may not always align with the reporting thresholds or operational scope of large international organizations. Such networks often operate with deep community trust but without the formal structures or public relations capabilities that attract extensive media attention. Consequently, while the *Rū'yat al-Ṣūfiyya provides* an invaluable internal perspective, external validation for every specific detail remains constrained by the inherent challenges of reporting from a complex conflict zone.

According to Abdur-Rahman Hasan Hamid, the Masīd predated modern humanitarian organizations in Sudan, functioning historically as a "mini-state" led by a humble Sheikh, or faqīr, who lived modestly but held profound spiritual and social influence. This institution integrated religious devotion with education, health care, and social support. It was simultaneously a place of worship, a hospice, a school, and a platform for intertribal integration and communal organization. This multifunctional character positioned the Masīd as a key player in responding to the humanitarian vacuum created by the war (Salih, 2023).

One of the most illustrative cases is the Masīd of Sheikh al-Sammani al-Bakri in Omaidan. As recounted by Hanan al-Misbah, Sheikh al-Sammani received large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) with unmatched hospitality. Families fleeing from Khartoum and other conflict zones were offered shelter, food, emotional comfort, and spiritual healing. They were welcomed "as though they were long-lost family members," with singing, sacrifice rituals, and ceremonies held to uplift morale. This symbolic and affective reception starkly contrasts the procedural and impersonal nature of many secular aid systems.

Figure 2. Ṣūfī Followers Preparing Communal Meals in a Masīd
Source: Salih (2023)

The Masīd did not operate isolated from the broader crisis but adapted rapidly to emerging needs. In Omaidan, for example, Sheikh al-Sammani initiated daily gatherings to personally check on displaced families' needs, engaging with elders and youth with compassion and sincerity. He supervised a medical center that operated 24 hours a day, supported by volunteer doctors and medicine donors from Khartoum. Such health infrastructure was indispensable, especially during the rainy season when mobility was difficult and state services ceased functioning.

What is striking is the non-bureaucratic ethos of the Masīd. As described by Ustaz Omar Mohammed al-Amin, services were rendered without formal registration, paperwork, or waiting lines. Guests were welcomed unconditionally—no questions asked, no records kept. This system, grounded in Ṣūfī ethics of selfless hospitality (*karām*), bypassed the formalities that often limit access to humanitarian aid, making the Masīd one of the few inclusive spaces for war victims of all backgrounds.

The April 15 war also highlighted the diversity of Ṣūfī responses. According to Muhammad Al-Fateh Hayati, Ṣūfī leaders reacted in varied ways: some migrated, some took political stances, but a significant segment—including Sheikh al-Yaqout and Sheikh Abdul Rahim al-Rukayni— remained in their Masīds, committed to neutral humanitarian work. Despite thefts, violence, and infrastructural damage, these leaders stayed to protect their communities, continuing food

distribution, spiritual counseling, and communal rituals. Their moral neutrality served as a stabilizing force in a politically fragmented environment.

These actions also reinforced the Ṣūfī Masīd as a critical node in Sudan's informal welfare system. Historically, the Masīd acted as a bridge between state and society; without the former, it fully extended its role into governance and aid provision. The Masīd offered religious services and filled the health, education, and social care vacuum. For example, marriages were arranged for war-affected individuals within the compound, with Sheikh al-Sammani covering expenses and hosting entire communities in joy-filled events. These initiatives reaffirmed the Masīd's centrality as a site of social regeneration.

Moreover, the presence of women in the Masīd, often underemphasized in scholarly discourse, was also made visible during the crisis. The women's prayer section in Sheikh al-Sammani's Masīd was expanded to accommodate increased attendance, and educational programs—lectures and seminars—were intensified for all attendees. These efforts contributed to psychological recovery and spiritual empowerment, particularly for women and children who had experienced displacement trauma.

The Masīd's role extended beyond provision to restoration. By invoking the Qur'anic ethos of the *Ansar* in Medina—those who welcomed the *Muhājirūn*—Ṣūfī leaders framed their actions within a sacred narrative of solidarity. As recited by Sheikh al-Sammani's community, "[They] love those who emigrated to them and find not any want in their breasts… but give [them] preference over themselves, even though they are in privation" (Qur'an 59:9). This spiritual framing strengthened both the morale of the displaced and the commitment of the host communities.

In terms of broader socio-political implications, the Masīd's operation during the crisis shows that Ṣūfī institutions are not passive spiritual havens but dynamic agents of social resilience. Their decentralized, values-driven approach contrasts with formal institutions' often politicized or resource-strained responses. Their capacity to mobilize local resources, volunteer networks, and spiritual motivation gave them an unmatched advantage in immediate crisis response.

As Sudan continues to grapple with prolonged instability, the experiences of the April 15 war suggest that reinvesting in and recognizing the Masīd as a legitimate actor in humanitarian frameworks could enhance crisis preparedness and community resilience. The enduring influence of Ṣūfī networks lies in their holistic view of the human person, not merely as a political subject or a humanitarian recipient, but as a spiritual being embedded in complex networks of care and meaning.

The implications of this work are twofold. Theoretically, it proposes "spiritual governance" as a viable analytical framework for understanding the role of non-state religious actors in maintaining social cohesion within fragile states. It underscores the need to look beyond formal political structures to comprehend the loci of functional authority and social capital in many post-colonial African societies. Practically, the findings strongly suggest that international humanitarian organizations and policymakers should recognize and engage with Ṣūfī institutions as legitimate and effective local partners in crisis response and peacebuilding initiatives. Their deep social embeddedness and moral authority represent an invaluable resource for sustainable community-led recovery.

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that Ṣūfī institutions in Sudan, particularly the Masīd, operate as multi-functional hubs of social order and grassroots governance. This role becomes critically pronounced during state failure. The core finding is that through a historically embedded synthesis of spiritual guidance, education, social mediation, and welfare provision, these institutions have proven to be resilient frameworks for community survival. The case study of the April 15, 2023, war provides contemporary empirical evidence of this enduring function, revealing the Masīd not as a relic of a traditional past but as a dynamic and adaptive humanitarian infrastructure. These findings extend previous historical analyses by projecting observations on the state-shaping role of

Ṣūfīsm into a context of state collapse. While earlier work illuminates the function of Ṣūfī orders in historical state formation, this study shows their capacity to act as a surrogate for state functions when formal governance disintegrates. Furthermore, the findings present a crucial counter-narrative to state-centric analyses of Sudanese Islamism. Where formal political Islam has often been intertwined with state power and its subsequent fragmentation, the Ṣūfī model of "spiritual governance" demonstrates a more durable, community-based form of authority rooted in moral legitimacy rather than coercive power. This aligns with broader research on the effectiveness of faith-based organizations in humanitarian response, which highlights their unique capacity for local resource mobilization and high levels of community trust in conflict zones. The originality of this research lies in its conceptualization of the Masīd as a dynamic infrastructure of resilience. By applying a critical documentary analysis to the contemporary case of the 2023 war, this study empirically bridges the historical understanding of Ṣūfī social roles with their practical relevance in modern humanitarian crises. The study confirms that the non-bureaucratic, values-driven, and decentralized approach of these institutions allows for a rapid and flexible response that often surpasses that of more rigid, formal aid structures.

This study is subject to several limitations inherent in its remote research design. The primary reliance on a central documentary source, while validated through an author interview and triangulated with secondary media, means the findings reflect a mediated representation of events. This methodology cannot fully capture the undocumented, spontaneous acts of aid, the internal decision-making processes of Ṣūfī leaders, or the perspectives of non-literate and digitally disconnected populations affected by the crisis. Future research is essential to build upon these findings. Once security conditions permit, direct ethnographic fieldwork should be prioritized to produce a granular understanding of how these institutions operate at the micro-level. Such research could explore how resources are mobilized and distributed, and how local power dynamics between Ṣūfī leaders and other community authorities are navigated during conflict. Furthermore, future scholarship could employ comparative methodologies, analyzing how the distinct theological orientations and historical trajectories of different Ṣūfī orders (e.g., Qadiriyya versus Sammaniyya) shape their respective humanitarian strategies. Finally, longitudinal studies are needed to track the long-term role of these institutions in post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between faith, resilience, and social transformation in Sudan and beyond

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