

Khalwah:

A Solitary Sufi Retreat

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PREFACE

The early history of Malaysia showed that the country was under the influence of Sufism since the introduction of Islam around 11-12th century. However, the situation changed when other Muslim groups such as Modernist Muslims, Salafis, Wahhabis and western educated Muslims gained their influence among Malaysians after the independence of the country in 1957. Their views spread in the country under the flight of 'ahl as-sunnah wa al-jamā'ah. However, there are many who insist to persist with their traditional Malays of practising Islam such as *Shāfi'iyyun* (Shāfi'ites) and *ṣūfiyyūn*. Among the *ṣūfiyyūn* (Sufis) who still persist with their spiritual practices are the members of the Naqshabandite Khalidite *Ṭarīqah* (NKT). They are active *ṣūfiyyūn* in the country and try to propagate the teaching of *taṣawwuf* and *ṭarīqah*. This study focuses on *khalwah* (spiritual seclusion) as one of the most important spiritual practices practised by some members of the *ṭarīqah* in Zāwiyah Madrasah al-'Ilm in Penor, Kuantan, Pahang. The study shows that *khalwah* provides a solution for spiritual needs among modern Muslims in the country. The spiritual lessons that have been taught during the session of *khalwah* such as *dhikr*, *murāqabah*, *tawajjuh*, *khatm khōjagān*, *ṣuḥbah* and *munājah* really give spiritual effect to participants (*sālikūn*) who are involved in the session. Spiritual aspects along with outer acts of the *sālikūn* are gradually changed for the better. These spiritual lessons cannot easily be understood and assimilated by the *sālikūn* except when they are continuously practised the spiritual practices and joined the session of *khalwah* under the supervision of a Shaykh. However, members of the *ṭarīqah* who try to provide the spiritual lesson to the public are still criticised by others. This criticism usually comes from misconception and misunderstanding from those who are not involved practically with the practice. Members of the *ṭarīqah* respond to the criticism by confirming that their spiritual practices are derived from the teaching of Prophet Muḥammad (p.b.u.h), his companions and Sufi 'ulamā'. The criticisms have not stopped people from joining the *ṭarīqah*. The value of lessons offered in the *ṭarīqah* makes some people persist with these spiritual practices as well as attract others. Sufi matters are not anymore an alien to many people in this world. However, to write on the subject is neither an easy task for young writers who incapable to master both of Sufi Islamic spiritual knowledge, principles of Islamic sciences, principles of modern methodology of doing research and writing. Perhaps, this book provides some useful information about these matters for young writers and researchers especially who want to further their interest on studying about Sufism, Islam and contemporary world.

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INTRODUCTION

The Sufi Order (*ṭarīqah*) or Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) is a discipline of knowledge in Islam with strong emphasis on the internal aspect of self-formation and purification. Its purpose is to prepare a means to enable an individual to be closer to God, a process that could transform one's behaviour for the better. It transforms the lower degree of belief and love to Allāh to the higher belief and love to Him.

Thus, it is not surprising to find people who are still practising this discipline today. The existence of Sufi *ṭarīqah* or Sufism among the Muslims in Malaysia is a not new phenomenon. History has it that the devotees of this discipline were also involved in resisting the colonialists. Among them were Abdul Rahman Limbung, Tok Guru Pulau Manis and Tok Janggut. The Islamisation of the Malay Archipelago was also triggered by figures who practised this *ṭarīqah*. Figures such as *Shaykh* Abdullah Arif, *Shaykh* Burhanuddin, *Shaykh* Shamsuddin As-Sumatri, *Shaykh* Abdul Rauf Singkel, *Shaykh* Abdul Samad Falimbani, *Shaykh* Muhammad Nafis Al-Banjari, *Shaykh* Abdul Samad Pulai Condong Al-Kelantani and *Shaykh* Abdul Wahab Rokan were deeply involved in religious, social and educational activities within the Muslim communities in Malaysia, Southern Thailand and Indonesia. However, the devotees of this *ṭarīqah* have not been given proper recognition by the society. Perhaps, this is due to the emergence of deviant Muslims who claim to be members of the *ṭarīqah*. However, their form of behaviour and acts have tarnished the reputation of the genuine members of the *ṭarīqah*. Strong opposition from members of the Salafis, Modernists and Wahabis also give negative impact to the development of *ṭuruq ṣūfiyyah* in the country. In addition, inactive movement from some members of *ṭuruq ṣūfiyyah* who want to propagate their spiritual agenda does not help to promote their reputation among people.

The members of the Naqshabandite Khalidite *Ṭarīqah* (NKT) are among *ṣūfiyyūn* in Malaysia who have tried very hard to continue the spiritual tradition among Muslims in the country. Although they are small in number, they still propagate the spiritual practices in the *ṭarīqah* such as *dhikr*, *murāqabah*, 'adab (etiquette), and *ṣuḥbah* (friendship) with a purpose that the new Malaysian Muslims do not forget their religious tradition they have inherited from their ancestors. One of these spiritual practices is *khalwah*. It is spiritual seclusion or retreat which members of the NKT believe can help to accelerate a *sālik* spiritual journey to their Lord. However, it is not just *khalwah* but also *ṭarīqah* and *taṣawwuf* which have been seen by some new generations of Malaysian Muslims as a science that do not have its roots in Islam as Jahid (1997) said: "Some Muslims believed that *ṭarīqah* and *taṣawwuf* are not among Islamic sciences, but were brought in by non-Muslims..." Besides this rejection, members of the NKT still persist in practising *khalwah* as part of their spiritual practices.

Many Muslims in Malaysia do not know what *khalwah* is all about. *Khalwah* has been treated as "berkhalwat" in the Malay language which means a man and a woman who do not have a marital relationship found together in an isolated place separated from the public. In the *sharī'ah* law the act is forbidden and wrong. *Khalwah*, in the context of religion, is only understood by a few Muslims who may come from religious background or where a session of *khalwah* has been conducted in their area. It is possible to say that the information about *khalwah* cannot be accessed by the public easily or insufficient information is known to non-members of

ṭarīqah about *khalwah* especially *khalwah* among the members of the NKT. This leads to misconceptions and misunderstanding amongst the public about *khalwah*. Therefore, the book attempts to answer the following questions:

- a. Why does the practice of *khalwah* become controversial among some Muslims?
- b. Does the practice of *khalwah* among the members of the NKT follow the Islamic teaching?
- c. Why do some people reject the practice of *khalwah* as found in the order?
- d. Why do the members of the NKT remain persistent in their practice and how do they manage to do so?

Even though the practice of *khalwah* has been criticised by some groups, there are *ṭarīqah* members who are still practising this spiritual exercise today. This situation seems to indicate that there are reasons that offer valuable spiritual lessons. The study of *khalwah* in the NKT is needed because it is amongst the important issues related to religion and contemporary social development in the country. The *ṭarīqah* has existed in some Malay Muslim societies for more than two centuries. It has grown and taken root slowly inside the society and has become more structured and manageable at the end of the 20th century. Although this *ṭarīqah* in general is not as well known as other Muslim organisations like ABIM (The Malaysian Youth Movement) or political parties such as UMNO (United Malay National Organisation) and PAS (Pan Malaysian Islamic Party) in modern Malay Muslim society, it seems more influential than twenty years ago. Its influence has penetrated various strata of the society. Some members are from a professional background and others are working people. Since the early 1990s, it is noticed that a number of university students and professionals have increasingly becoming members of this *ṭarīqah*. The early 21st century showed that the most important and pro-active members of the group were educated people of various backgrounds. Some of them were from a religious background and others were not from a religious discipline. At the same time some of participants had attitude problems such as drug addict or lack of anger management who sought spiritual help from the *Shaykh* of the *ṭarīqah* so they could be freed from their problems. Therefore, the study of the NKT in Zāwiyah Madrasat al-‘Ilm, which is, at present, under the supervision of *Shaykh* Dr Ustaz Jahid Sidek and some thoughts of his previous mentor *Shaykh* Imam Ishaq Muhammad Arif, will enrich the study of the Muslim community in Malaysia and be useful in order to provide contemporary information about some *ṣūfiyyūn* behaviours and activities.

Objective of the Book

The main objective of this book is to explain how *khalwah* is practised by some of members of the NKT in Malaysia, specifically it tries:

- a. to study the concept of *khalwah* as described in the *Qur’ān* and *Sunnah*;
- b. to study the practice of *khalwah* among the members of the NKT in Zāwiyah Madrasat al-‘Ilm, Penor, Kuantan, Pahang, Malaysia;

- c. to document various practices (mystical culture) among the members of the group; and
- d. to document some doubtful questions on the practice of *khalwah* and *ṭarīqah*.

The book attempts to limit its discussion in which it only tries to investigate *khalwah* and its relation to the *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah*. In other words, the *Qur'ān* and books of *al-Ḥadīth* of *'ahl as-sunnah wa al-jamā'ah* will be the main references to the book because the focus population of this book is the Sunni Malay Muslims or members of the NKT in Zāwiyah Madrasat al-'Ilm, Penor, Kuantan, Pahang, Malaysia. However, in order to get additional information about the practice of *khalwah* among some other members of the NKT, the researcher will have to access some information among members of the NKT in Zāwiyah Madrasah Babul-Khairat of Kampung Melayu Majidi, Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia, in Zāwiyah 'Iḥyā' al-Qulūb of Kampung Dong, Raub, Pahang, Malaysia and Zāwiyah Paya Mak Insun of Pendang, Kedah, Malaysia. The focus period of the research is from 1970 until 2000. It is the period of the previous *Shaykh* Imam Ishaq bin Muhammad Arif (d. 1992) in Dong Raub, Pahang, Malaysia and falls within the period of *Shaykh* Dr Ustaz Jahid Sidek who still actively runs his Sufi movement until today. The significance of this period is related to the transition and progression of the NKT movement in the modern period in Malaysia which also illustrates the historical context of the *ṭarīqah* at the end of 20th century and how the movement is preparing to interact with the new era of the 21st century. *Shaykh* Imam Ishaq bin Muhammad Arif was a mentor in Zāwiyah 'Iḥyā' al-Qulūb in Kampung Dong since 1965 - 1992 in Raub, Pahang Darul Makmur in Malaysia. He was also a previous *shaykh* to *Shaykh* Dr. Ustaz Jahid bin Sidek. During the discussion about *khalwah* in Zāwiyah Madrasah al-'Ilm, it seems the discussion about him cannot be excluded because he was an important figure in the NKT in East Coast Malaysia (Pantai Timur). Perhaps, he was the first *shaykh* in that area (or in Malaysia) to re-systematise and re-arrange some of the *ṭarīqah* practices in order to suit the culture, thought and lifestyle of the people at that time. Moreover, he wanted people to know that the NKT is a simple and easy Sufi practice that can be practised by anyone interested in it. Later, after his death, his thoughts spread through his disciples especially through *Shaykh* Dr Ustaz Jahid bin Sidek. During the discussion about some thoughts that reject the practice of *khalwah*, it seems the discussion will not give much attention to books written by the group of Wahabis, Salafis, Islamic Reformist and Modernist, but will concentrate on “questions” raised frequently by people in Malaysia who are against or have doubt about *khalwah*, *ṭarīqah* and *taṣawwuf*. This means that all disagreement upon *khalwah* from outside the Muslim community in Malaysia will only be discussed within reasonable limits.